

No 21

5 cents.

WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY** EVERY WEEK.

UNDER THE VENDETTA'S STEEL;
OR, A YANKEE BOY IN CORSICA. *By* LIEUT. J. J. BARRY.



Gr-r-r-rack! Corsican treachery was no match for Dave Graham's Yankee football grit! "Why, it's Pietri, the Knight of Blood himself!" shuddered Caroli, reeling back upon the soldiers. "I'll pound the heart out of him!" gritted Dave.

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WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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Under the Vendetta's Steel

OR,

A Yankee Boy in Corsica

By LIEUT. J. J. BARRY.

CHAPTER I.

DAVE SEES THE STEEL FLASH.

"Oh, our people are very good, and very peaceful," urged young Signor Caroli, earnestly.

"The best behaved on earth," declared the Count del' Morani.

"Then those stories of their vendettas and their blood-feasts?" asked Dave Graham, slowly, and paused.

"Those belonged to the past," said Caroli, quickly.

"And they do not happen in these days?" persisted the American boy.

The Count del' Morani shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, of course," he replied, with a smile, "now and then someone becomes careless."

"Careless?" repeated Dave. "What do you mean, Count?"

"Oh, I do not know that I can explain," replied the Count, with another peculiar smile. "But, to be sure, our people have always quick tempers."

"And when those tempers are riled——" suggested Dave, but again paused.

"Why, then, of course," smiled the Count, "someone may be hurt."

"But not badly," interposed Caroli, earnestly. "Nor do these quarrels happen often."

"That is what you have been telling me all along, Caroli, my dear fellow," cried Dave. "You've been try-

ing, ever since I first knew you, to knock all of the romance out of your native island, Corsica."

"Ah! Then you call the vendetta romantic?" cried Count del' Morani, eagerly.

"It depends," Dave replied, carelessly. "Brute murder is always brute murder. But sometimes men have something to fight for which makes the fight truly noble. But Caroli insists that Corsica is now as peaceful as a German college town."

"And I am right," cried Caroli. "Am I not, Count?"

"For the most part, my dear fellow," replied the Count. "But, my young friend," turning to Dave, "tell me more about yourself, since we can tell you so little about Corsica."

"Humph!" uttered Dave, drily, as he turned from his friend, Caroli, to the Count. "There isn't much to be said about me. I'm just an average American boy, from Pittsburg, State of Pennsylvania. I finished last spring at the military school, and now I'm ready for college—if I want to go. That's what my father sent me abroad to find out. On my return, in the fall, I'm to decide whether to go to Yale or to enter some line of business."

"Your father must be a very rich American?" suggested the Count, carelessly.

"Oh, no," Dave replied. "My father is a lawyer. He earns a fair income, but he's no money prince."

"Ah, but still he is rich as we would call it in this country," pressed the Count.

"If dad's rich," laughed the boy, "it will be news to him."

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Still he is able to send you abroad to travel—and spend money?”

“This trip costs but a few hundred dollars,” replied the boy, carelessly.

“A few hundred of your American dollars? But that is a few thousand francs here in Corsica, and is almost wealth.”

“Is it?” asked Dave, opening his eyes in honest surprise.

The Count, lighting a cigarette, rose with a bow, excused himself and strolled slowly away along the veranda of the little inn perched up on the hillside above the tiny little port of Barria.

Not more than thirty, the Count was a good deal of a dandy.

Scrupulously dressed in the best Italian fashion, he had the general air of prosperity.

Further up on the hillside, a mile away from the inn, was the Count's estate—a few acres of vineyard, many acres of pasture, and the almost crumbling remains of a gray stone castle that was more than six hundred years old.

Everything about Barria was tiny except the great mountains that stretched away to the east of this hilly little port town.

The port town itself was tiny, containing not more than eight hundred souls.

The fort, at the harbor's mouth, was also tiny, containing only some thirty French soldiers and two officers.

The inn stood in grounds by itself, well up on the hillside, and looking down over the town.

It was an old-fashioned inn, nearly as old as the Morani castle itself.

Once a week a little steamer from France and Italy stopped at Barria.

There were no railroads. Barria, hemmed in by the hills and mountains, seemed shut off from the world except for that little weekly steamer.

But Dave, who had arrived this night with his new friend, Caroli, was delighted with the old-fashioned air of the little Corsican town and its people.

Our hero had met Michael Caroli, a native of Ajaccio, the capital of the island, two weeks before.

Caroli, who came of good family, and was well educated, seemed to be a mighty good fellow of twenty-two or three.

Dave had proposed that they travel together through Corsica, and Caroli had accepted.

Dave was paying the bills, but he would have greatly offended Caroli had he offered to pay the young Corsican anything for acting as guide and counsellor.

Now, as soon as the Count del' Morani had gone out of ear-shot, Dave turned to his friend.

They were sitting at a table out on the broad porch, looking down over the few twinkling lights of the town and the harbor.

“Caroli, I thought you kicked me under the table?” hinted the boy, in a low tone.

“I did,” whispered the Corsican.

“Why?”

“I feared you might become too talkative with the Count.”

“Isn't he all right?” asked Dave, in surprise.

“Oh, yes,” returned Caroli, quickly, with a swift look over his shoulder.

“Then why shouldn't I talk with him?”

“But not, perhaps, about money matters,” suggested Caroli, quietly.

“Why, I didn't, my dear Caroli.”

“The Count asked you if your father was rich.”

“And I replied that he wasn't.”

“Yet you gave an idea that your father must have a good deal of money.”

“That's dad's business, anyway. But I don't believe my father is overburdened with money.”

“The Count now thinks differently.”

“Well, what difference would it make, anyway?” challenged Dave, eyeing his gloomy-faced friend keenly.

“Do not walk in the mountains, signor,” replied Caroli, quietly. “And very likely we shall be doing well to leave Barria to-morrow.”

“Leave Barria?” cried Dave. “Why, it's the prettiest place I've seen.”

“Who talks of leaving Barria?” broke in the smooth, laughing voice of the Count del' Morani, behind them.

Caroli started, paling a bit under his olive skin.

But Dave, not seeing that, replied:

“Why, Caroli is trying to make me laugh. He warns me against walking in the mountains, and urges me to leave Barria.”

“Why?” demanded Morani, turning sharp eyes toward his countryman.

“Oh, I—I was jesting, as my young American friend suspected,” replied Caroli, shrugging his shoulders, though his voice was a bit unsteady.

“I hope, signor,” replied the Count to our hero's remark, “that you will not think of leaving Barria just yet. In fact, I have had it in my mind to ask you to try the dulness of a few days of life at my miserable little old castle.”

“Why, that would be downright jolly,” replied Dave, eagerly, but Caroli shuddered slightly.

“And we might,” hinted the Count, “try a forty-eight hours' hunting trip back in the mountains, with one of my men for guide.”

As he spoke the Count rested his flashing gaze on Caroli.

“More and more fun around Barria!” Dave cried.

“Then you will accept my poor hospitality, signor?” asked the Count, with grave politeness.

“Dave, on the point of saying ‘yes,’ received such a kick under the table that he winced.

“I—I shall be delighted, Count, as soon as I have time to make my plans.”

“And perhaps Signor Caroli will honor us, too, with his

presence?" suggested the Count, flashing another sharp look at Dave's friend.

"It will be a great honor," stammered Caroli.

The Count, with a graceful bow, resumed his stroll.

"We leave Barria by the steamer in the morning," whispered Caroli, swiftly. "Do not say so, though, to anyone."

"Well, you are a fellow of mysteries," gasped young Graham. "What on earth are we running away from?"

"Perhaps from the banditti," was the Corsican's low answer.

"Bandits?" gasped Dave. "Say, do you really mean, then, that there are such people around here?"

"I fear there may be," said Caroli, soberly.

"Oho! Then you admit, at last, that all romance is not dead in Corsica? And you think I'd leave, now that you've told me this, Caroli?"

Caroli was about to reply, but Count del' Morani was again coming their way.

"I'm just finding, Count," cried Dave, gaily, "that there is some romance left in Corsica. My good friend here tells that there are at least brigands left on the island."

"It is sometimes said that that is so," replied Morani, easily. "Still we seldom hear of them, and never see them. Signor Caroli is perhaps giving our island an undeservedly hard name."

Again Caroli paled slightly under his olive skin. He seemed uneasy, now, in the presence of the court.

But at this moment all three quickly turned their heads, as a clear, sweet voice cried out:

"Ah, Count! You are punctual. That is delightful of you!"

Dave was looking, with all his eyes, at the wonderfully pretty face of a girl of his own age, seventeen, who had just stepped out on the porch, followed by an elderly woman.

Both were plainly either English or American—probably the latter.

The girl was dressed nearly all in white, with a Spanish mantilla of white lace resting over her head and falling over her shoulders.

She was almost dark enough to have been Italian herself, had it not been for the brilliantly white skin that gleamed beneath her thick black hair.

"Good evening, signora and signorina," replied the Count, bending low first to the elderly woman and then to the girl. "And now we shall have our drive?"

He had turned away wholly from Dave and Caroli as he addressed the ladies.

"We did not see your carriage, Count," replied the girl, "or we would have come down sooner."

"But it is here—close at hand!" cried the Count, placing a silver whistle between his lips.

He blew a sharp blast, then offered either arm to the ladies and led them to the edge of the porch.

Out of the darkness came an open carriage, drawn by

four pure white horses. On the box were driver and footman in the picturesque costumes of Corsica.

Behind the carriage, on coal-black horses, rode four grim, silent, armed men, each carrying a short carbine and wearing at his sash a short sword and a revolver.

"Oh, Count, how splendid!" cried the girl, clapping her hands in glee as the porch lights fell across this picturesque scene. "Why, the whole looks like a glimpse from a picture that is three hundred years old!"

"You like it?" smiled the Count, bowing again, as he halted with the ladies at the edge of the porch.

"It's splendid," glowed the girl. "But why these armed men, Count, when you have been assuring me that there is no violence, nowadays, in Corsica?"

"Ah, it is just an old custom with our noble families, signorina," the Count assured her. "We always like to travel with our armed retainers, as the Corsican nobles of old did."

"And there is no danger of brigands?" insisted the girl.

"Absolutely none, signorina," the Count assured her.

"I'm afraid I'm disappointed, then," she pouted.

"That girl's American—all the way through," Dave whispered, glowingly, to his friend.

"Do all Americans love danger?" asked Caroli, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"All Americans like new experiences."

The Count del' Morani had assisted the ladies into his carriage.

Seating himself on the front seat, facing them, the Count gave the signal that caused carriage and escort to turn and disappear slowly into the darkness.

Now out came the bustling Bussoli, the landlord, short, very stout and wonderfully talkative.

"Why, gentlemen, you are drinking no wine!" he cried, reproachfully.

"I don't use the stuff," Dave returned, lightly. "But serve my friend, Caroli, if he will have wine."

The Corsican shook his head.

"You have American ladies here, Bussoli?" Dave asked.

"Ah, yes, two."

"What are their names?"

"The elder is a Mrs. Norton. The other is her niece, Miss Phoebe Fair, signor."

"They have been here long?"

"Two weeks, signor."

"They are acquainted with the Count, I see."

"Ah, very much so," replied Bussoli, with a wink. "I think the ladies will stay here, and that the younger one will become a Countess. The Count's family is highly noble, you know. And the girl is very rich."

"They're engaged, then?" Dave asked.

"Betrothed, you mean, signor? Oh, dear, no! But they soon must be, for his excellency, the Count, has been spending his money so fast to snare this rich beauty that he must soon win her or be a ruined man. But, oh, dear! I am talking much too fast. The Count would be angry."

"I shan't tell him that you said anything," our hero

promised. "So the young lady likes the idea of becoming a Countess, apparently?"

But Signor Bussoli, certain that he had talked as he usually did, more than he ought to, grunted out a reply and hastened away.

"You do not know your young countrywoman?" asked Caroli.

"No, but I'd like to," Dave answered, honestly. "Lord, wouldn't I like to be her brother! Wouldn't I give her a talking to? The idea of a sweet, healthy, big-hearted American girl throwing her life away on a fellow who can give her nothing but a cheap title?"

"Do not let the Count hear that you have said such a thing as that," urged Caroli.

"Why, I'd like to say it to him myself."

"Don't," counselled Michael Caroli, crisply. "The Count, as you have seen, has too many armed men in his employ."

"Too many men for what?"

"Why, my dear young American, if you offended the Count, it might be awkward to meet some of the Count's bravos."

"What do you mean?" blurted Dave, wheeling on his friend. "Wouldn't the Count be man enough to do his own fighting?"

"If he had to," responded Caroli. "But it is a way with our nobles when they have quarrels with— Pardon me, Signor Graham, but remember that the Count del' Morani is noble, and that you are not. He would—pardon me, won't you, signor?—regard you as an inferior, and if he became angered he might have one or two of his commoners do the fighting with you. It would be a fighting, too, my dear Signor Graham, in which you would not have much chance."

"And a black-leg who'd do a thing like that would imagine himself my superior?" blazed Dave. "Bosh! In my country we call a man a sneak who can't do all his own fighting."

Caroli shrugged his shoulders, looking hopelessly at this strenuous young American who wouldn't understand that things might be different in this little island of Corsica, to the south of Italy.

Corsica is largely Italian in its population, though the island is owned by France.

"Oh, come, let us take a walk, my dear Caroli," laughed Dave, a minute later.

"In the town, then," urged Caroli. "Not towards the mountains."

"Oh, towards the town, then," agreed Dave.

Two hours later, or towards ten o'clock, they strolled back to the porch of the inn.

It was deserted at first, but soon came the roll of wheels.

Up rolled the Count's carriage, followed by the armed escort.

But the footman helped out only the elderly woman.

She, however, stood on the porch as if awaiting her companions.

Off a little way rolled the carriage. The mounted armed men rode a few yards away from the porch, then reined up, sitting in saddle and smoking cigarettes.

A few minutes passed by. Then, out of the shadows under the great trees that lined the driveway, came Miss Fair's cold but protesting voice:

"Not another word, Count, if you please!"

"But, signorina——" argued the voice of the Count.

"Not another word, sir, was what I asked of you!"

There was the sound of quick steps. Out of the darkness came the girl, her head high up, her step quick if not angry. Beside her hurried the Count del' Morani, almost trotting in order to keep up with her.

Dave had sprung to his feet as soon as he heard the contesting voices.

"Sit down again!" whispered Caroli, anxiously.

But Dave gave no sign of having heard.

Running up the steps to the porch, the girl placed her hand on the other woman's arm.

"Let us go to our rooms, aunt," she said, coldly, though earnestly. "Good night—and good-by, Count!"

As the girl and her aunt stepped through the doorway Morani sprang after them.

Yet, quick as he was, Dave Graham was quicker.

Our hero stood with his back to the door, slipping in there so swiftly and adroitly that the Count almost bumped into him.

"You're in my way, sir!" cried the Count, haughtily.

"That's to be regretted," Dave admitted, coolly.

"Out of the way, boy!"

Dave was about to reply, though not to budge, when the door moved violently behind him.

To avoid being knocked down, Dave stepped to one side.

Out burst a man. At the first look one would know him to be an American. He was about twenty-five years of age, slender, yet strongly-built and broad-shouldered, and six feet in his stockings. He looked to be a typical young American college man.

"Hm! I reckon Miss Phoebe has a brother!" thrilled Dave. "He looks able to hold the job, too!"

Dave backed slowly away a few yards.

The young man, having come through the door and espied the Corsican nobleman, halted before the latter, looking down at him with cold eyes.

"Count," he began, slowly, but with steam in his voice, "I have just heard a few words from my cousin that sound strange. She informs me that you proposed a walk through the hotel grounds, and that you proposed marriage to her."

"That is not a sin, is it, signor?" cried the Count, his face white with passion, or some other emotion.

"No," replied Miss Fair's cousin, slowly. "A man does honor to a woman when he informs her that he desires her, of all women, for his wife."

"Well, signor, I have done your cousin that honor, then," replied the Count del' Morani, more easily.

"She has thanked you for the honor, and has told you that it cannot be," was the young man's steady answer.

"But that is not the end of it!" cried the Count, eagerly.

"You are mistaken there. It is the end."

"But she must listen to me again!"

"She will not, sir."

"She must."

"Count, bear in mind that 'must' is a word that I allow no man to use toward my cousin. You cannot see her again. She does not wish it. If you are a gentleman, you will accept this as the last word."

"Not see her again? Not speak?" blazed the Count, furiously. "I tell you, signor, she shall not leave Barria until I have plead my cause again!"

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded the young man, coldly.

"Anything that you please," cried Morani, defiantly.

"Count, you are a blackguard!"

Morani's face went deathly white as he backed away a step.

"What do you mean, you—you commoner?" demanded the Corsican noble.

"I mean that you are not to annoy my cousin any further; that if you do, I shall feel tempted to pick you up and wring your neck! Is that plain enough?" questioned the young American, coolly.

Dave Graham, as he stood looking on at the picture, fascinated, saw Morani's right hand creep stealthily under his coat-tail.

In the next twinkling, our hero saw the flash of steel.

Morani held a stiletto behind his back, a fact of which the tall young man was ignorant. The Corsican seemed to be gathering himself like an American wildcat about to spring.

Flash! Dave Graham's bound carried him just behind Morani.

Dave's quick grip and twist secured the stiletto.

The next bound carried our hero away and over close to the railing of the porch.

Phoebe Fair's cousin saw that act, saw the glimpse of steel in young Graham's hands and understood.

Smash! The tall young American's fist landed on Morani's face, knocking the nobleman down.

Dave jabbed the point of the stiletto into the hard wood of the railing. With a wrench Graham broke the blade in two.

Then, as Morani, white and still with passion, leaped to his feet, our hero, holding out the two pieces of the stiletto, broke in coolly:

"Count, allow me to return your knife!"

CHAPTER II.

IN THE THICK OF A CORSICAN FIGHT.

In a twinkling there was commotion of the hottest kind.

Bussoli, the landlord, with a shriek, bounded out of sight, yelling:

"The foolish Americans!"

Caroli, with a hand under his Corsican coat, moved swiftly yet half-reluctantly close to our hero.

Out in the driveway beyond the mounted armed men of the Count leaped from their saddles and came running close to the porch.

Phoebe's cousin had not stirred after delivering that knock-down blow.

"Count," he remarked, coolly, "if you feel angered by the blow, you will understand that John Norton is always at your service in the matter of satisfaction."

Morani had been chokingly trying to recover his breath.

He glared hotly at Dave, who still held out the pieces of the broken stiletto, then wheeled snarlingly on young Norton.

"Signor," glared Morani, "you are ignorant and in need of a lesson. My bravos, did you see this common fellow's insult to your master? Take him and cudgel him well!"

"Get out of here as quickly as you can!" whispered Caroli in our hero's ear.

Dave shrugged his shoulders impatiently, but did not stir from the spot that he occupied close to Norton.

That latter uttered a contemptuous snort.

"Are these fellows going to cudgel me, Morani?" he demanded, coolly, as the men started to ascend the steps to the porch.

"They will rebuke your insolence!" glared the Count.

"Stop where you are, fellows, and listen!" called Norton, coldly. "The first one of you who steps on this porch, I'll snatch him up and break his back!"

Norton stepped forward as he spoke.

"Hurrah! Good old stuff!" glowed Dave, as he stepped forward at Norton's side.

Michael Caroli, with a groan, followed them about half way.

"Now, then, who's going to be the first to try to cudgel me?" demanded John Norton, eyeing the four armed retainers steadily.

"Jack, Jack! What does this mean?" cried an alarmed voice from the doorway.

"Up to your room, Phoebe!" called her cousin, quickly.

"But, Jack——"

"Up to your room, child, or you'll get sadly in the way!"

The door closed.

"Count," mocked Norton, "your fellows do not seem very keen to cudgel me."

With an oath, Morani leaped over the rail to the ground, darting in among his men.

"This means trouble—quick!" muttered Dave, his eyes kindling at the prospect of fight.

"You're American?" asked Norton, in a swift undertone.

"Yes, and I'll fight like one if a row starts."

"Back to the house, both of you!" urged Caroli, who was gamely sticking to his young American friend, though

he knew better than either of them what was soon to happen.

But Norton, with the pluck of his six feet, snorted contemptuously.

"Now, then, my bravos!" cried the Count, suddenly.

There was a sudden sound behind our friends, then the flash of steel in the air close to them.

"We forgot the rascals on the carriage box!" cried Caroli as, knife in hand, he wheeled and crouched low to defend himself against the driver and footman.

Both of these worthies were crouching in for the spring.

Morani himself had a knife once more, secured from one of his men.

All five of these men now leaped up the steps.

It was seven to three—and only one of the three armed.

"You know what to do, my bravos!" quivered Morani, himself keeping back out of the reach of John Norton's huge fist.

Chk! A yell that made Dave, somehow, feel sick.

The first sound was that of the blade of Caroli, sinking into the side of the footman.

But, as that fellow staggered back and went down, the driver closed in on Caroli, stabbing him under the shoulder.

"Cospetto! I'll fight better than two dead men yet!" snarled Caroli as he struck for the nimble driver and missed him.

Crash! The first one of the bravos to get within reach of John Norton was caught by the point of that athlete's boot in his abdomen.

The winded wretch fairly flew through the air, landing out in the driveway.

Cluck! Dave had dodged a thrust made at him by one of the bravos and landed on the fellow's jugular, sending him in a backward somersault down the steps.

"Back, my bravos—back all of you!" panted the Count. "Take to your guns!"

Other figures were moving out there on the edge of the darkness.

"They've got help coming!" warned Caroli. "Back to the house—that's the safest place!"

"That's right," clicked Dave. "Norton, we don't stand any show out here in the open without guns."

"I've got revolvers up in my room," whispered the big American.

"Then up there, without a second's loss of time," urged Dave.

Crack! There were flashes out of the darkness.

Half a dozen bullets sped past the Americans.

"I'm hit again," cried Caroli, faintly.

"Then into the house with you, please, old fellow," begged Dave.

Caroli moved to the door, opening it.

Dave, with no notion of bolting until his wounded friend had gotten safely inside, stood his ground.

But John Norton, who had twitched at the sound of the volley, now threw up his hands, as if about to fall.

"They've hit you, Norton?" breathed Dave, leaping to his fellow-American's side.

"Yes—but not much, after all, I guess!"

Dave caught the big fellow.

"Back! Let me get you through the doorway!" urged Dave. "Caroli, open the door."

"Get them all together as they go through the doorway, my bravos!" roared the Count's voice. "Make it a blood-feast!"

From out of the darkness came a series of almost blinding flashes.

Bullets sputtered and hissed about that doorway, as the three sought to get through.

Somehow, two of them got through—Norton and our hero.

Norton sank weakly up against the post at the foot of the stairs, but Dave, thrusting open the door again, called: "Caroli!"

No answer.

"Caroli, my dear fellow!"

Again no answer.

"Caroli, my dear fellow, are you hurt?"

Though the showing of his head was the signal for another little tornado of bullets, Dave Graham took the risk of peering out through the doorway.

He couldn't see Caroli, and drew back just as something hot stung him at the top of his left shoulder.

Clang! Dave shot the great bolt into place.

"Norton," he begged, "lead the way up to your rooms, like lightning. We've got the safety of two American women on our hands now!"

"Right, old chap!" gritted Norton. "Oh, I'm strong enough. Nothing ails me. Follow me!"

With his hand on the balluster rail Norton led the way rather quickly up the stairs, our hero following right at the big fellow's heels.

Phoebe Fair, her face deathly white, anguish showing in her eyes, met them at the head of the stairs.

"Oh, Jack, they've hurt you!" she cried, tremulously.

"Not as much as I'm going to hurt someone else!" gritted the big fellow.

"Another American to stand by us in our trouble?" cried Phoebe, looking at Dave.

"Yes," replied the boy. "Hurry to your room. Norton and I will get the weapons and join you."

They had halted at the door of Norton's room.

Down below came the hammering of men trying to force the stout porch door in.

"I know where the pistols are!" cried Phoebe, leaping in ahead of them both. "Here you are."

She came darting back to the door, bearing a dress-suit case.

"Our rooms are best for defense!" she panted, pointing down the corridor.

Norton was reeling again. Dave threw one arm about the big fellow to steady him.

Mrs. Norton's startled face showed in the doorway to which the girl had pointed.

But John's mother drew back quickly as she saw them.

Just inside the doorway John's mother caught him herself.

"Oh, my son, you're not badly hurt?" she cried, anxiously.

"Get those pistols out in a flash. We're going to need 'em!" directed Dave, as he heard the heavy pounding on the door below.

Then that door came down with a crash, but not before Dave had snatched two loaded revolvers from the case.

"Up and drive them out of their trap, my bravos!" sounded the hoarse voice of the Count del' Morani.

CHAPTER III.

THE FAIR FACE THAT WAS BRIGHT IN DANGER.

Down the corridor came a panting figure, as if fleeing before the coming bravos.

"Bussoli!" challenged Dave, aiming both revolvers from the doorway.

"Diavolo! Don't stop me!" gasped the fear-stricken landlord.

"In here with you," rang the American boy's determined voice, "or I empty both guns into you!"

There was only a second in which to decide.

Bussoli's wide-open eyes studied those of the boy all in a flash; then the landlord bolted into the room.

But there were great tears of fear in his dull eyes.

"Diavolo! You have dragged me into a death-trap!" he squeaked.

"It'll be death, all right, if you don't serve us all the way through!" warned the American boy.

"Let me have one of those pistols," ordered John Norton, staggering forward and steadying himself at the wall.

"Oh, my son!" cried Mrs. Norton.

"I'm all right, mother—will be in a minute," came the weak but cheery voice of the big fellow.

Dave, without turning from the doorway, passed back one of the pistols, which Norton eagerly took.

"Watch the landlord, among other people," Dave hinted.

As for our hero, he was still standing at the doorway, one revolver trained down the corridor toward the head of the stairs.

Down that way everything was quiet now.

"They heard me hold up Bussoli," quivered Dave, "and they know there's danger in the air. We can look out for tricks!"

Dave stood there, while those back of him in the room were silent, save for the hoarse panting of the terrified

Bussoli, who sat in a chair under the watchful eyes of Jack Norton.

But just then a head showed at the head of the stairs, close to the floor.

Crack! Dave Graham had been waiting for that.

He fired, and like a flash the head was drawn back.

"Are you there, Morani?" called the boy.

No answer came from the stairs.

"Because, if you are," defied Dave, "I might as well tell you that you're wasting your time trying to pick up two Americans who know their way in any part of the world."

From the stairs came a snarl that was not in words.

"You coward!" taunted Dave. "You talked so loudly of being a gentleman, and now you're really making war on women!"

"Good!" growled Jack Norton.

Crack! Dave had fired again, at another peeping head from the top of the stairway.

"You'll want cartridges soon," whispered a steady voice at our hero's side. "I'll place some in your hand and drop others in your coat pocket."

Dave felt her soft fingers touch his with a thrill. Then he felt the metal touch of cartridges being pressed into his hand.

Cartridges, here, meant a manly game. He stiffened. His courage would have been doubled had that been needed.

Crack! As our hero fired the third shot at a showing head he felt half a box of cartridges dropping into his coat pocket.

He turned swiftly to smile at the girl.

She smiled back at him. In the hour of deadly danger her fair face was bright with the grit of the true American girl.

"Get back, please," he whispered. "I'm afraid you may get hit."

"I'm standing by, in case you get hit," she murmured in his ear. "If you have that misfortune I shall take your place. Poor old Jack isn't steady enough for much."

Crack! Dave had fired for another head that showed close to the barrel of a carbine.

"Why, you're wounded, too!" cried the girl, in alarm, as she espied the blood spots at the top of his left shoulder.

"If I was, I've forgotten it," whispered back Dave Graham, without once taking his eyes away from the top of the stairs.

"But it must be very painful," urged the girl, anxiously.

"Not a bit, I assure you, Miss Fair. I'm not thinking of it, but of my poor friend, Caroli."

"Your friend?"

"A splendid Corsican chap who was traveling with me. He stuck to us splendidly, too, though he was wounded.

But in getting through the door he failed to follow us. I

got that little sting on the shoulder from trying to peer out to see Caroli—poor fellow.”

Crack!

If Morani's braves wanted to know whether the corridor was still being guarded, they found out that it was.

Not once did a head show at the head of the stairs but it got an instant, answering shot.

“Do you want to help?” asked Dave, in a whisper.

“Of course I do,” cried the girl, reproachfully.

“Then go and help your cousin to one of the windows. He can sit there and keep watch outside. I'm afraid those rascals may use a ladder to a window and sneak in on us.”

Like a flash Phœbe was away. She whispered to Jack Norton, then anxiously watched the big fellow as she guided his steps across the room.

Sinking to his knees beside a window sill, yet with his body shielded by the wall, Norton could easily keep that position as long as his senses remained.

“But put out the lights, Phœbe, before we open a window,” whispered her cousin.

The girl hesitated, then darted across the room on tip-toe to ask Dave if she should do this.

“Yes,” nodded our hero.

Crack! In a twinkling he “broke” his revolver, slipping in cartridges at lightning speed.

“But, with the lights out, how can we watch this horrid Corsican, Bussoli?”

“There'll be a light in the corridor, still,” Dave's whisper answered. “Stand so that Bussoli is between you and the light, and you can see what he does.”

The lights were quickly out, all save a lamp that glowed down the corridor, midway between Dave's post and the head of the stairs.

Crack! That was Graham's pistol, aimed at a showing head.

Bang! That was the loud report of a carbine from the head of the stairs.

The Corsican bullet struck the corridor wall not far from where the lamp burned.

“They're trying to shoot the light out, so they can sneak down on us in the dark,” throbbed Dave inwardly, with a swift rush of alarm. “And, by the Great Dewey, they'll land that trick sooner or later!”

So far our hero, revolting at the thought of killing a man until it became necessary, now tried his best to hit the next head that showed.

“It's a plain case of our lives or theirs,” groaned the boy. “Whatever happens, Morani shan't get at these women!”

Crack! One of the Morani crowd, growing bolder, exposed his head, one shoulder and his carbine in his effort to get a shot at the wall-lamp down the corridor.

Crack! “Diavolo!”

“I hit him, all right!” clicked the boy. “As good luck next time! Why, if nothing better offers, we may succeed in shooting up the whole dastardly gang.”

But outside from the grounds now came a hail in Morani's voice.

“Bussoli, where are you? Answer, knave!”

“Answer, if you want,” nodded our hero over his shoulder.

“Most excellent Count,” quavered the landlord, “I am a prisoner in the room with these infernal Americans!”

“A prisoner?”

“Even so, your excellency!” shook the scared, fat little man. “I swear it!”

“Then you are in a death-trap with your American friends!” called the Count's voice. “Bussoli, Pietri is here with his men, and he will smoke you all out. Pietri, see if the knave of a landlord knows your voice.”

“Are you there, Bussoli?” roared a heavy, bull-like voice.

At that sound the fat little landlord fairly rolled out of his chair, kicking over the floor in his fright.

“That's him—Pietri!” shrieked the little landlord, frothing at the mouth in his terror. “That's Pietri, the blackest of the Corsican bandits. Pietri, the Knight of Darkness, himself!”

CHAPTER IV.

PIETRI SENDS THE KILLING ORDER.

“Get up on your chair, fellow!” ordered John Norton, sternly.

But Bussoli, stopping his rolling, now lays very still on the floor, save for his shaking.

“Pietri, the Knight of Darkness!” he sobbed, miserably, in his fright. “Then, indeed, we are all doomed. Oh, you infernal Americans, you will understand now what you have done to me, an honest and innocent man! You have condemned me along with yourselves. Pietri! Even the hand of heaven is withdrawn from us now.”

“Miss Fair,” called our hero, softly.

“Yes.”

“Would you mind getting something hard—something hard—and hitting that miserable landlord over the head if he opens his mouth again?”

“I'll do it,” replied the girl, vimfully. “Silence, now, Bussoli, you weak-hearted rascal!”

Crack! That the enemy had not left the head of the stairs was proved by the appearance of another head.

A yell followed our hero's shot.

“I must look out that I'm not tricked,” pondered the boy. “They may provoke me into firing a lot of times and yelling each time, making me think I'd hit a bunch of 'em. Then they could keep quiet for a long while and trick us into the notion that we'd settled them all, and try to sneak out that way. That would be a fine trap to step into!”

Crack! John Norton had fired from the window at last.

“Are they creeping forward out there?” called Dave, softly.

"One fellow was wriggling this way over the ground, and I fired, driving him back," murmured Norton.

"Pietri will set fire to my inn, and burn us all out!" quavered Bussoli's broken voice.

Crack! Phoebe had struck the craven over the head with something back there in the dark.

But Bussoli's direful words had, nevertheless, struck terror to all four of these staunch American hearts.

Morani had spoken of "smoking out."

Surely there was nothing to hinder the bandits from setting fire to the inn and shooting down anyone who tried to rush out from the blazing building.

"Lord, there's something going on over yonder!" quivered Norton's low voice, as he peered anxiously out through the window. "A lot of figures scurrying. And now others coming forward. I've got to try a shot at that, whatever it is!"

Crack! The flash and the report of Norton's pistol was followed by an angry command:

"Stop that, you imbecile! Stop that, in the name of the French Government!"

"The French Government!" quavered Dave, joyously. "Can it be that help has come from the fort?"

"Who are you?" challenged John Norton.

"Captain Bernadine, of the French Army, with a detachment of infantry," came the prompt answer. "Are you the Americans?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then stop your firing while I march my men nearer."

"Watch out for tricks, Norton," warned Dave.

"You can bet I'm watching, lad!"

Nor did our hero once relax his watchfulness along that corridor.

"Oh, it's all right," called Norton, joyously, at last. "I can see the French uniforms."

A minute later they heard the steady tread of infantry on the porch.

Then a voice called up the stairs:

"I am Captain Bernadine. I am coming upstairs. Don't fire."

But Dave held his revolver in readiness until he beheld, first the baggy uniform of the French infantry, and then the short, stout little officer who was inside the uniform.

"Come on, sir," begged our overjoyed hero, lowering his weapon.

Phoebe Fair flew to provide lights in the room.

Dave saluted as the officer passed through the doorway and followed him in.

"So you have actually met the bandits, almost under my official nose?" demanded the Frenchman.

"Bandits?" echoed Dave. "Oh, yes, and had a sample of your Corsican nobility, too!"

"Our nobility?" demanded Captain Bernadine. "Have you, too, had a touch of the sun-stroke that soured the wits of that fellow Caroli?"

"Caroli?" echoed Dave, joyously. "Then you have seen him?"

"It was Caroli, wounded, who worked his way to the fort and assured me that American citizens were being attacked by bandits," replied the French captain. "But that fellow, Caroli, had the impudence to tell me that the Count del' Morani led the bandits."

"Caroli spoke the truth!" protested Dave.

"He certainly did," came weakly from John Norton.

"Are you all crazy?" demanded Captain Bernadine, looking suspiciously around him. "The Count is one of our nobility—a gentleman!"

"He led to-night," Dave declared, stubbornly.

"Monsieur," replied the captain, gravely, "we will not discuss it further."

Dave, after a swift look at the Frenchman, felt certain that that officer really doubted the charge.

"You have been imposed upon. You are over-excited," declared the French captain, coolly.

"Perhaps you doubt," hinted Dave, "that there have been any bandits about."

"Oh, I think there have been bandits here, though it is a long time since they have troubled us around Barria," answered Bernadine. "Certainly I heard shots up here while I listened to the tale of Signor Caroli."

"Did you encounter any of the bandits?" demanded our hero.

Captain Bernadine turned a broadly smiling face to the American boy.

"Meet them?" he chuckled. "Little danger of that. You may be sure that the rascals had scouts down towards the fort. When I started with my detachment the scouts brought word on the wing, and the bandits have fled, as usual. They are safe in the deep forests by this time."

"But Caroli?" urged Dave. "Is he badly hurt?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"Not so badly, my surgeon tells me, but that Signor Caroli will be walking his way in a few days."

"Your surgeon?" asked Mrs. Norton, moving quickly forward. "Can you bring him, sir, to attend my son?"

"Why, mother," protested the athlete, "I don't need a surgeon."

But, even as he spoke, John Norton fell over on the floor unconscious.

With an exclamation Captain Bernadine ran to the young man's side and bent over him.

"It is a bad wound in the chest," murmured the Frenchman. "But I do not think it will prove really dangerous."

"You can get your surgeon, though?" insisted Mrs. Norton, who was on her knees at the other side of her son.

"I will send one of my men for the surgeon at once," promised the Frenchman, rising.

Going to the door, he called loudly.

From below a voice answered in French.

"You, Bussoli?" demanded Captain Bernadine, after calling out his order. "What have you to say, Monsieur Landlord? Do you know who the bandits were?"

"On my soul, I do not!" quavered the landlord, standing on his feet but still shaking badly.

"What have you to say, Bussoli, as to the Count del Morani? Did you see or hear him here?"

"Not since he returned from taking the ladies on a drive, captain," protested Bussoli.

"Then, of course, the Count had nothing to do with any attack here?" persisted the captain.

"Assuredly not, captain," lied the fat little landlord, glibly.

"As I thought," nodded the Frenchman. "But tell me, Bussoli, have you really any idea who did lead the bandits?"

"Not an idea, captain," cried the landlord.

"You—you liar!" gasped Dave, glaring witheringly at the little knave.

But Bussoli, with the captain behind him, was brave now.

"If you cannot show me proper respect in my own inn you may leave it," he declared, pompously.

"Oh, we'll leave it all right by the steamer in the morning, I reckon," huffed Dave. "That is, if poor Norton is in fit shape to be moved aboard the steamer."

"My surgeon will see to it that he is, I imagine," suggested Captain Bernadine. "As soon as my surgeon comes I will take my leave of the ladies and march my men back to the fort."

"What's that, sir?" uttered Dave, aghast. "What on earth was that proposition, captain? Did I hear you rightly?"

"I am about to march my men back," the Frenchman answered, a bit stiffly.

"And leave us to the mercy of the bandits?"

"They have been scattered."

"They can return when you leave."

"I do not think they will."

"Pardon me, captain, but have you any right, sir, to think like that? What would your government be able to say to the United States Government if you withdraw, leaving us without protection, and the bandits sneaked back in here and wound us up? What answer could your government make to ours?"

"But I cannot keep my men up all night," argued Bernadine. "Even soldiers must have their sleep."

"Then you will allow us to sleep to-night within the fort?"

"We have no accommodations there for ladies," replied the officer.

"Then can you see that we are taken out to the steamship to-night?"

"No one is allowed aboard that vessel until two hours after daybreak."

"Then, captain," protested Dave, strongly, "surely you do not mean to leave helpless American women exposed to any attack that the bandits may see fit to return and make."

"Oh, I see," sighed Bernadine, "that I shall have to leave a sergeant and some men here to guard the inn."

The surgeon, a thin, nervous, active but very polite little man of forty, was soon at the inn.

He declared that John Norton, who had been revived to consciousness, had an excellent chance to recover.

The surgeon volunteered to remain through the night, and declared that he could put his patient comfortably aboard the steamship in the morning.

Caroli was in the hospital at the fort, where he would remain until the steamer sailed.

"So everything is attended to now," smiled Dave.

"But pardon, monsieur, you yourself are wounded," remarked the surgeon, glancing at the boy's shoulder.

"Oh, if mine was the worst there was here," laughed Dave, "we wouldn't have spoiled your night's rest by sending for you."

Nevertheless, the little surgeon insisted on washing and binding Dave's "scratch," as our hero contemptuously described it.

"Let me help you on with that coat," begged Phoebe, as Dave turned away from the care of the surgeon.

Then, after having helped him on with the garment, the girl took his right hand between both her hands and looked earnestly into his eyes.

"Are you aware, fellow-American," she asked, "that we haven't thanked you yet? That we don't even know your name?"

"But that is easily remedied," laughed Dave, and he introduced himself.

"It was a splendid, noble thing, the way you defended us," cried Mrs. Norton, leaving her son, who lay on a sofa now, and crossing the room to rest a hand on our hero's shoulder.

"I will take my leave now, ladies," announced the captain, bowing. "But I will leave my sergeant and some of my soldiers. Have no fear. You will be wholly safe through the night."

Dave soon excused himself and went down to the porch.

He knew that Mrs. Norton and Phoebe would want to be alone with Jack Norton, and also that the ladies would need some rest before they went aboard the French steamer in the morning.

"I shall see you called in time," Dave promised. "In a few hours we shall be away from Barria forever."

Our hero went down on the porch.

Here, besides the sergeant, he found eight soldiers, a guard that ought to be sufficient, especially as the two Frenchmen on sentry duty appeared to be wholly on the alert.

Dave did not feel like going to his room.

The night being warm and balmy, he seated himself in a great chair on the porch.

"Will you have the extreme kindness to see that I am called just at daylight?" he asked of the sergeant.

Receiving that fellow's prompt promise, our hero leaned back in a big chair, closed his eyes, and at last fell asleep.

He awoke once in the night, but found the French guard still alert, so closed his eyes and went off once more to sleep.

"Monsieur, daylight will be here in a few minutes," sounded the voice of the sergeant in his ear as that officer shook the boy's sound shoulder.

Dave awoke promptly, got up, stretched and rubbed his eyes.

Then he took a few turns about the porch, but halted suddenly in consternation.

Enough daylight had come to see things distinctly, even at a distance.

"Sergeant!" cried our hero, excitedly, seizing the fellow's arm and pointing.

"Well, monsieur?"

"Look at the harbor!"

"Well? I see it, monsieur."

"But the steamer!"

"What——"

"There's no steamer in the harbor!" panted our hero.

"Surely enough, you are right, monsieur!" muttered the sergeant, rubbing his eyes, then looking again. "That steamship sailed in the night!"

"And there won't be another for a week?"

"Surely not, monsieur!"

Dave's head began to swim.

"Pardon, signor," broke in Bussoli's shaking voice.

"But I have just come across a letter that is addressed to you. I have thought that——"

But Dave Graham, breaking in short on the rascally landlord, snatched the paper from the other's hands.

It was a note signed by the single name of Pietri—a note of warning that the American party must perish.

Dave read but haltingly in Italian, yet he made out the gist of the note.

Then he passed it to the sergeant.

"Merciful heaven!" crossing himself, after a look at the note. "From all that we have heard hereabouts of Pietri, I am very thankful that that note is not addressed to me."

CHAPTER V.

ALL FOR THE LOVE OF FIGHT.

"Then, monsieur——"

"When my friends go, I will stay behind," promised Dave Graham.

"And you will help me."

"I will help you to run down this Pietri."

"Ah, but that is magnificent!" cried Captain Bernadine. "I am extremely anxious to capture this daring rascal. It will mean my promotion, for one thing."

"And I'll take as much pleasure out of his capture as you will," Dave remarked.

"Why, may I ask, monsieur?" demanded the captain.

"Why?" repeated Dave. "Why, simply because the fellow thought he could drive me away from Barria by threats. I'm too much of an American to run away from the man who threatens me. Let the women get safely away from the danger of harm, and let them get poor old wounded Jack Norton away with them, and then, captain, I shall be glad to work with you day and night to run Pietri down and finish him. And I'm sorry we can't run down the Count del' Morani with him!"

Captain Bernadine shrugged his shoulders.

"So, monsieur, you have not yet got over the notion about the Count's part in that attack?"

It was Dave's turn to shrug his own shoulders.

Good fellow though Captain Bernadine was, that officer could not possibly be made to believe that a nobleman had taken active part with brigands.

It was five days now since the attack.

In that time Caroli had recovered enough to be about.

John Norton was still in bed, though able to be up a little while each day.

It was likely to be some weeks, though, ere this strapping American athlete could hope to be himself again.

But when the steamer came in two or three days later he would at least be well enough to be taken aboard to sail for France.

It was his first duty to get his aunt and his pretty cousin away from danger.

Count Morani had even had the impudence to try to call on the Americans, but they had refused point-blank to see him.

A sergeant and a guard were all the time at the inn, though there appeared to be no need of their being there.

And every day Captain Bernadine called. He spoke gravely to the ladies, then devoted himself to a chat with Dave.

Truth to tell, this middle-aged captain had taken a great liking to this bright American boy.

Dave reminded him much of his own adventurous youth, when, as a dashing sub-lieutenant of cavalry in Algiers, the captain had had all manner of daring adventures with the tribesmen and bandits of that country.

"Your friend Caroli does not go about much now," observed the captain, presently.

"I don't see as much of him as I did," Dave admitted.

"Is he showing the white feather?" half-jeered the captain.

"I don't believe that," Dave replied, warmly. "Italian though he is, and afraid as he is with reason of these bandits, he stuck to us like a man the night of the attack. Why, through his serving us, he is now under the ban of the vendetta."

"So are you," smiled the captain.

"But my case is different. I almost courted the anger of the bandits."

"You stood by your friends. That is just what Caroli did."

"But these fellow-Americans were not my friends at

that time. I stood by my own country-people. Caroli has risked all in standing by a friend from another country."

"How long since you have seen Caroli?"

"Why, now I think of it, not since breakfast this morning. And I was wishing he had been here to hear that ballad singer who was around early this forenoon."

"Oh, that half-witted singer? The ragged fellow, with a voice like an angel's? He was down at the fort. Well, my brave American, I must leave you, for the afternoon is nearly spent."

Bernadine arose and went off down the path toward the village.

By the time that he was safely away Phoebe, a vision in white, came out upon the porch.

"I was waiting until I saw the captain go," she smiled. "He is such a prosy fellow."

"Isn't that ungrateful," asked Dave, "when these soldiers are here through the captain's friendliness?"

"Oh, yes, of course," she nodded. "I didn't mean to say anything slighting of your friend, the captain, Mr. Graham."

"Don't turn around," advised Dave, in a low voice. "There's Morani, waiting to catch our eyes, so he can raise his hat."

The Count, gotten up as usual—that is to say, as a dandy—was even then riding past the gate at the end of the drive.

As he sat on his horse just then he presented a figure and an air of dash that was likely to captivate many a girl.

But Dave, shrugging his shoulders, turned them on the young nobleman.

Phoebe did not turn around at all, so that the Count seemed likely to have his ride by the inn for nothing.

"Just rise and step into the house," counselled Dave, in the same low voice.

"Is that the Count's horse I hear?" murmured Phoebe, rising.

"Yes."

Without a word, the girl rose and glided inside the inn.

But Dave kept his seat on the porch chair until Morani, riding up to the porch, sprang from saddle, tied his horse, then came jauntily, cheekily up on to the porch.

"The day's best wishes to you, signor," saluted the Count, impudently, though bowing politely.

"My best wish," quoth Dave, without turning around, "is to be alone."

"Ah! You do not care to see me?"

"I shall be a little better pleased if I never see you again, Count."

"Ah! You Americans do not forget, do you?"

"Some things we do not, Count."

Morani stepped around so that he could chain Dave's gaze.

"Since you remember so well, my friend," he cried in a low voice, though warningly, "why do you not also remember that I am powerful here, and that it is yet two or three days before there will be a steamer here?"

Dave looked at the fellow coolly.

"Count," he asked, "have you any objection to my calling a couple of those soldiers yonder, that they may hear what you have to say to me?"

But Morani shrugged his shoulders with equal coolness.

"Those soldiers, signor, should make you think how important my friendship is hereabouts. But for me those soldiers would not be necessary."

"You bore me, Count," protested the boy, coldly, hiding a yawn behind his hand.

Morani's eyes flashed at that intentional insult.

"Oh, very well, since you will not have my proffered friendship——"

"You'll take it elsewhere?" cried Dave, with sudden, mock enthusiasm. Now, that'll be fine! Good-by, Count!"

Morani looked as if about to talk, but choked, changed his mind, then walked noisily back to his horse. Mounting, he rode away.

It was dull after that, with only the sergeant to talk to, for ever since that memorable night of the attack Bussoli had kept out of the boy's way.

But there was more life again when the evening meal was served.

That took place in one of Mrs. Norton's rooms, Dave being always an invited guest at dinner.

Jack Norton, lying on a sofa, had his meal with them.

But Dave, who always knew better than to intrude, withdrew soon after the meal.

It was seven o'clock. Unless Phoebe came downstairs there were three long hours to be spent on the porch, with only the sergeant to talk to, until bed-time.

"Where can Caroli be? Has he skipped? Or been caught? I don't blame him for doing the first thing, but I hope the second hasn't happened to him."

For Dave had not been wholly truthful in saying that he did not know where Caroli was.

In fact, our hero had paid Caroli twenty dollars in good American money to undertake a desperate piece of work.

As twenty dollars in our money is a large sum in Corsica, Caroli had eagerly undertaken the task.

He had been, in fact, the half-witted singer of ballads, who, after singing in Barria, and taking up what small coin he could, had started over the mountains as if to go to the next town.

Dave had begun to be worried. He was pacing the porch, a little after eight in the evening, when Caroli arrived, still disguised.

But Dave paid no heed as his friend loitered around.

As quickly as he could, though, Caroli slipped into the inn and presently came out in his own garb and looking once more like himself.

"Well?" whispered Dave, as the Corsican slipped into a chair beside him.

"I have seen Pietri," whispered Caroli, hoarsely.

"Good enough! In camp?"

"No, but close to that camp, I believe."

"Tell me all about it," Dave begged.

"There is but little to tell," Caroli answered, slowly.

"About four miles from here, up in the mountains, I fell in with two fellows who looked like laborers. But they paid me a few copper coins to sing for them. While I was singing Pietri came along. Then others joined. I was paid a couple of francs, and so continued to sing until dark. Then they left me, one or two at a time."

"That must have been near their camp, then," Dave concluded, quickly. "And now, to see the good captain at the fort to-night."

"Pardon, gentlemen," broke in one of the soldiers, approaching; "but in the road, at the gate, I found this note, addressed to Signor Caroli."

Caroli quickly broke the seal of the envelope.

As he read his face turned to a sickly green. His fingers trembled as he passed our hero a paper on which was written:

"Pietri knows what you have been doing, and now he dislikes you more than ever!"

"Did you see the fellow who dropped this note?" demanded Dave, quickly.

"No, sir," replied the soldier.

"Have you seen anyone loitering about?"

"No, sir."

"Then who has passed?"

"Only the usual teamsters, mule-drivers and laborers," replied the soldier.

Dave rose quickly.

"Sergeant," he asked, "will you be good enough to order one of your soldiers to follow us down to the fort?"

"At once, by the captain's orders," came the quick reply.

Dave and Caroli made their quickest way down to the little fort at the harbor's edge.

"Oh, you will be the death of my poor legs!" groaned Captain Bernadine when he had heard what Dave wanted.

"But is your promotion dear at the cost of sore feet?" demanded the American boy.

"Naturally not," laughed the captain. "And it must be as you say—the start must be made at two in the morning. It shall be done!"

* * * * *

At six o'clock the next morning Bernadine, a sergeant and twenty soldiers left the fort, taking an unfrequented path toward the mountains.

They were well up in the hills when day broke.

Caroli was leading the way, but Dave, unwilling to see his friend alone at the post of danger, walked beside him.

Back of them, almost in single file, came the officer and his men.

"Of course if Pietri's note meant anything, it means that I was suspected, and had been followed back to where I removed my disguise," Caroli whispered. "And now I shall not be safe anywhere in Corsica while Pietri lives."

"You were marked for death before," smiled back Dave.

"So was I. Nothing else that we can do can make Pietri hate us any more than he does now."

"Pietri is a terrible fellow," whispered Caroli, "but he is not the real bandit."

"Do you mean that he is an agent?"

"His is the arm that strikes," whispered Caroli, nervously, "but I am certain that he is only the arm for——"

The poor Corsican hesitated, as if it were deadly to speak the name even when backed by soldiers.

"You mean that Morani is the real bandit? The real thief? The real man of vengeance?" persisted Dave.

"I have said enough," replied Caroli, shrugging his shoulders. "So have you, my very dear friend."

"Hush! We are within a quarter of a mile of where I met Pietri yesterday. See! There's a distant village."

"And you meet him again," growled a low voice from the very bush at their side.

A figure flew through the air as a rocket falls. The bearded man landed at their feet, his arm uplifted, the Corsican steel flashing as it drove straight for Caroli's breast.

There was not even time for Dave Graham's Corsican friend to dodge back out of death's way.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO CAN PLAY AT DISGUISES.

But Dave, at whom the blow was not driven, had caught sight of the flying figure just an instant before Caroli had.

Cr-r-r-rack! It was Dove's fist that landed, crushingly, on the enemy's jaw.

Corsican treachery was no match for Dave Graham's Yankee football grit.

"Why, it's Pietri, the Knight of Darkness himself!" shuddered Caroli, reeling back upon the soldiers.

"I'll pound the heart out of him!" gritted Dave.

Our hero butted forward, head down, instantly after landing with his fist.

The boy's head struck the foe amidships, while he was still staggering from the work of the fist.

That sent the wretch reeling.

As the fellow fell the young Yankee fell with him, gripping hard at the wrist of the hand which had held the knife.

That knife now lay on the ground a yard or two away.

Whack! whack! The boy's fist rose and fell with hammer-like force.

In five seconds as many blows had been rained down on the bandit's face.

One eye was closed, Pietri's nose was bleeding and two of his front teeth were loose.

"If you are the dog Pietri, surrender!" gruffly commanded Captain Bernadine, running up and presenting the point of his sword at the bandit's breast.

"Oh, he'll surrender all right, when I get through with him!" gritted the American boy.

Whack! whack! whack!

He had caught the Corsican foul from the start, and he was following up his advantage on a dazed wretch.

"That's for Miss Fair, this for her aunt," cried the boy, pummelling. "And this big one for Jack Norton, the athlete. Here's one for Caroli—and now for myself!"

With that Dave let go his hold at the bandit's wrist, clutching with both hands at Pietri's throat.

"Captain," called Dave, without looking up, and while still pummelling, "why don't you throw your men out around us? Do you want to be surprised by a rescue party?"

Thus aroused, Bernadine quickly, sharply posted his men.

"Now, call two of your men here to tie the wretch," Dave hinted, halting at last.

It was time he halted—time for Pietri, anyway.

That bandit's face looked more like a piece of raw meat than it did like anything human.

"We can hardly punish the knave, now, by executing him," declared Captain Bernadine, as he looked on at the tying. "He has had worse punishment from this young fiend of an American."

"I'm sorry I didn't give the fellow more," grumbled Dave. "But what would have been the use? He was getting too groggy to know just what he was getting."

"I never saw a man punished worse," agreed the captain.

"Well, sir, your promotion should be won now," muttered Dave, looking into the Frenchman's eyes. "You have only to get your man safely back to Barria."

"Even that is attended with its dangers," muttered Bernadine, gravely.

"That is your business. I won't advise you."

Bernadine quickly made his disposition of his men.

Four were sent ahead.

Four more were sent to the rear to guard that end of the column.

The main body consisted of twelve soldiers.

But these were divided into two squads of six each, one squad a hundred yards ahead of the prisoner, and the other the same distance behind him.

Bernadine, Caroli and our hero trudged along between the advance guard and the first squad of the main body.

"Sergeant, if your prisoner tries to escape, kill him before you do anything else," rang the captain's voice, sharply. "If anyone tries to rescue him again, kill!"

"Yes, my captain."

"Be alert, sergeant."

"To the death, my captain!"

For a mile and a half the little column marched without molestation.

"It was easier than I had dared to dream," Bernadine confessed at last. "Pietri all but arrested himself. It

was simple, with the way in which you grappled with him, my American."

"It wasn't hard to grapple with him," our hero laughed. "That's what we learn in the American game of football."

"Football! If I were not too old I would learn it."

"You'd make a winner, even now, captain," smiled Dave.

Bernadine laughed, not having any idea how his short, fat figure would look on the gridiron of the great American game.

Bang! That gun, discharged at their rear, was the instant alarm signal that made Dave Graham wheel like a flash and go sprinting back.

The first squad of the main guard was dashing into the brush, two or three of the men firing recklessly as they went.

Dave followed them. Captain Bernadine came panting up by the time that both squads of the main guard had met in the half-jungle before the deep forest.

There stood the sergeant, his face the picture of woe, wringing his hands, while his comrades clustered around.

Dave, first on the scene and grimly understanding it all, said nothing—nothing, at least, above his breath.

"Well, blunderbuss?" roared the captain. "What have you done?"

"I'm the son of misfortune," wailed the sergeant, a man of thirty.

"If he ain't, he ought to be," grunted Dave to himself.

"What happened, blockhead?" demanded the captain, angrily.

"The prisoner got away."

"That much I can see for myself, blockhead," retorted Bernadine, more angrily. "But how? He was tied, and you were supposed to have sharp eyes."

"But a comrade of the fellow's darted out of a bush, tripped me, and—whisk!—they were both out of sight!"

"How soon did you fire your first shot?"

"As soon as I could get on my feet."

"And you men at the rear of the sergeant?" demanded Captain Bernadine, searching out the men with his eyes, "could you not run up in time to overtake the prisoner when you saw what was being done?"

"But we did not see, captain," answered one of the men promptly. "A turn in the road shut out our view. We ran like the mischief as soon as we heard the shot. But Pietri was out of sight by then."

"What do you think of such blockheads?" growled the captain, turning to our hero. "And I see my promotion gone!"

"You'd better look at your sergeant's back, then," murmured Dave, in a voice so low that only the captain heard.

"What mean you?"

"Surely the sergeant has not thought to brush his clothes," replied the American boy. "Look for the dust or the dirt on his clothes, where he fell when he was tripped."

"I hain't thought of that."

Craftily the captain moved around his sergeant.

His walk of inspection brought him back to our hero.

"I hadn't thought of that before," replied Bernadine, in English, a tongue that none of the soldiers understood.

"There's not a bit of dust or dirt on the fellow's uniform."

"He must have brushed it off, then, in going through the bushes. But there is another test."

"What?"

"Ask your sergeant to take you back to the exact spot where Pietri escaped?"

"I don't see what is in your mind, M. Graham, but whatever it is the fellow might take us back to the wrong spot."

"Then the men who were behind him can prove him a liar," shot Dave, quickly.

"Sergeant," said the captain, suddenly, "take us back to the spot where Pietri left you—the exact spot, mind, as can be proved by your comrades."

"Surely, captain," whined the sergeant, his face paling, "you do not suspect——"

"Take me back to the spot—the real spot!" thundered Bernadine.

In silence the sergeant led the way.

"Here is the exact spot, my captain," announced the sergeant at last.

Bernadine stood looking all about him. Our hero did the same.

"You said that Pietri's comrade leaped upon you from a bush," hinted Dave at last.

"Well, that was the truth," declared the sergeant.

"From which bush did he leap?"

"Why, this one right here," declared the sergeant, pointing to a large clump at his left.

Dave stepped cautiously up to the bush, peering at the ground inside the clump.

"You say, sergeant," questioned our hero, "that the accomplice leaped out upon you from this bush?"

"That I would swear to!" cried the fellow, with energy.

"It is strange," murmured Dave, "that a fellow crouching in this clump made no prints with his feet."

With an oath Captain Bernadine was at our hero's side.

"You are right," he cried, suspiciously. "There are no marks of feet here."

The sergeant's face had grown much paler. He trembled, and something seemed to choke in his throat.

"But these seem to be your prints, sergeant," went on Dave, exploring close to the path. "Here is where you sprang into the bushes as you fired."

"Yes," admitted the sergeant.

"There is no use in looking on this side of the road any further, then," murmured Dave in the captain's ear.

They crossed the road to the other side, peering in carefully among the bushes.

"Now, here's what must have been the print of Pietri's own foot, as he started on the run through the bush," Dave suggested, calling the captain to his side and pointing to the ground. "You see the way it points, captain.

Suppose we go a little way in that direction? Ah! See this!"

Dave stooped, but was quickly up, with a tangled mass of cut rope in his hand.

"Only thirty feet or so from the road," cried the boy, triumphantly, "and yet we must believe that Pietri and his comrade halted while the other fellow cut the bonds from Pietri's arms."

"That is absurd!" trembled Captain Bernadine.

"Captain, would it not be as well to have a look at your sergeant's knife?"

The French officer turned as soon as he heard the word.

Striding back to the road, where the pallid sergeant stood trembling under a tree, the captain requested, quietly:

"Sergeant, your knife. Let me see it."

"But, my captain——"

"Your knife, sergeant!"

Trembling worse than ever, the sergeant thrust his hand into a trousers pocket, bringing forth a clasp knife.

Bernadine snatched it from him, hauling the blade open.

"Two or three little shreds of rope fibre still sticking to the blade," announced the captain, quietly but dangerously. "Fellow, you are a far greater blockhead than I had supposed. Sergeant, hand your gun to a comrade."

"But, my captain——" began the fellow, hoarsely.

"Your gun to a comrade, sergeant! So! Blouet and Cassignac, the blockhead of a sergeant is your prisoner. See to it that he does not escape, as Pietri did."

Trembling so that he could but barely stand, the sergeant needed help from his guards in order to walk along.

"And I was on the point of believing the scoundrel!" exploded Captain Bernadine. "Ah, my young American, you are truly clever, and I am but an old ass—too stupid to merit the promotion that now I assuredly shall not get."

"You're not going to try to find Pietri now?" Dave asked, in a tone of deep disappointment.

Bernadine shrugged his shoulders.

"What would be the use?" he asked, dully. "These Corsicans are true foxes. Now that Pietri has had ten minutes the start of us, a year's pursuit would not bring us to him. No; our last chance of finding him is gone. Form, my men, and we will go back to town to let the silly girls laugh at us. And all because one of your number was a knave, false to his country and to his comrades!"

"But how, do you figure, did Pietri ever persuade the sergeant to help him?" Dave queried, as he trudged along once more between Bernadine and Caroli.

"Are you not clever enough to guess that, my American?"

"Perhaps I could guess, but you might do it better, captain. Was your sergeant scared by a threat that the band would assassinate him? Or did he accept Pietri's promise of some great reward to be paid to him?"

"I cannot guess," replied Bernadine, whose face now expressed nothing but intense despair.

And so the column returned to town, stumped, minus the prisoner that had been.

"I'm thankful, at least," Dave said, at parting with the captain, "that we found your rascally sergeant out."

"Why?"

"Because at times the fellow has been in command of the guard at the inn. Suppose he had sold us out to Pietri? I shudder to think of it!"

"That would not have been so easy," replied the captain. "The fellow's comrades are a loyal lot. They would have blocked his game."

"But I shall feel safer now, captain, when the steamer sails with the ladies. I shall stick to them to defend them day and night now. Not until they are safe out of the island of Corsica shall I have any heart for following you on the trail of Pietri."

"We are not likely that soon to have fresh track of the scoundrel, anyway," Bernadine answered, gloomily. "Pietri is sometimes caught, but never held. He has friends everywhere in this district."

Dave's first move, on reaching the inn, was to find out that Phoebe and her aunt were still safe.

Then he told them, briefly, what had happened.

"And now I must go to breakfast," he declared.

"Won't you have your breakfast in this room, Mr. Graham?" asked Mrs. Norton.

"To tell the truth," Dave confessed, "I shall be better pleased to if I may invite Caroli here, too."

"By all means invite him," assented Mrs. Norton. "But why better pleased to be here?"

"Because I do not dare to have you ladies out of my sight until I see you off on the steamer," our hero answered.

"And then you will be going with us?" suggested Phoebe, smilingly.

But Dave shook his head.

"Not going with us?" cried the girl.

"Miss Fair, as soon as that steamer has passed out of the harbor I shall spend all my time and thought in helping the French captain to run down the rascal who has spoiled your visit here."

"By Jove, I'd like to remain to help you!" cried Jack Norton, with enthusiasm.

"You couldn't be of any use for weeks, old fellow," Dave answered.

"I suppose not," sighed Norton, ruefully. "But, by ginger, you won't have Pietri run down in weeks, either. Tell you what, Dave, as soon as I'm fit to stand up and tramp around a bit, I'll come back here and help you."

"John," cried Mrs. Norton, protestingly.

"I mean it, mother. Do you think I'd let one American stand all alone in a fight of this kind? And when his part in the fight came through his standing by us?"

"Good for you, Jack," cried Phoebe, running over and kissing her big cousin.

Dave and Caroli had breakfast together in that room.

Later the ladies excused themselves to dress.

Caroli, wishing to smoke a cigarette, adjourned to the porch, where Dave followed them.

They were the only occupants of the porch.

As they sat there that dull, hot morning, all that happened at first to attract their attention, was the driving into the inn yard of a peddler of vegetables.

As he drove around to the rear Dave noted only that the driver had a canvas tarpaulin thrown over his stock.

Out at the rear of the inn Bussoli's voice could be heard as he haggled with the peddler.

After some fifteen minutes the peddler drove away again.

The sergeant now in charge of the little guard at the inn sat out under a tree, drowsily smoking a cigarette.

One soldier paced the driveway as a sentry. The other soldiers were drowsing under a tree not far from the sergeant.

It was a drowsy morning altogether. Caroli, having finished three cigarettes, lay back in his chair, his eyes closed.

Dave caught himself nodding. He awoke with a start, looking at his watch.

"Why, Phoebe ought to be down," he muttered.

He waited fifteen minutes more, then went up and tapped on Mrs. Norton's door.

"Come in," called Jack.

"I—I came to see where Miss Fair was," hesitated Dave.

"Why, isn't she down with you?" demanded Mrs. Norton, quickly.

"With me?" gasped Dave. "I haven't seen her!"

"Why, Bussoli came here and said——"

"Did that rascal take her away?" demanded Dave, turning white.

"Certainly he did."

"The scoundrel!"

Dave stopped to say no more, but darted through the corridor and down the stairs.

On the porch the first one he met was Bussoli. Dave's swift, vengeful fist knocked the landlord down—and out, too!

"Sentry!" called Dave, sharply. "Did the young lady leave the grounds?"

"No, sir," came the soldier's quick answer.

"Miss Fair, Miss Fair!" called the boy, running around the porch.

There was no answer. Dave Graham knew now that his worst fears had been realized.

"Caroli, wake up; wake up, man!" screamed the boy, shaking his Corsican friend. "Two can play at disguises! That vegetable peddler! He was never here before! They have overpowered Miss Fair and have taken her away under that canvas tarpaulin!"

CHAPTER VII.

"THAT ISN'T THE WAY A YANKEE FIGHTS!"

His face wholly white, Dave stood in Mrs. Norton's room, telling Phoebe's aunt and cousin what had happened.

"Get to Captain Bernadine as quickly as you can!" implored Jack Norton.

"I suppose it must be reported to the captain," said Dave, moodily. "But little good that will do."

"The military is our only hope," cried Mrs. Norton.

"Then the hope is small," declared Dave, wretchedly.

"But the quicker you get the military out——" began Norton.

"It will be half an hour at the earliest before Bernadine can have a column of men started," groaned Dave. "By this time the wagon is already well away from Barria, and Phoebe is being taken—somewhere—through the almost trackless forest by that human fox, Pietri."

"That infernal wretch, Bussoli," raged Jack Norton. "Whatever else happens, he mustn't escape punishment."

"I knocked him down and out," Dave stated. "And I've placed him under arrest. The soldiers are holding him until they hear from their captain."

Norton, realizing now the uselessness of rushing the military out on a trail that had already grown cold, was in a little calmer frame of mind.

"Have you any plan at all, Dave?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"They won't kill the poor child, will they?" sobbed Mrs. Norton.

"Are they holding her for ransom, do you think?" questioned Jack Norton.

"I can only say I don't know to both your questions," Dave shivered. "But if any harm happens to Phoebe Fair, one thing is as certain as that the sky hangs over us."

"What?" breathed Jack.

"I'll find the way to kill the Count del' Morani."

"Is his hand in this?" cried Jack Norton, hoarsely.

"Unless I've been fooled," Dave gritted, vengefully, "Morani is the real head of the band. It's the means by which he supports his rank."

"I'll pay any money to get the child back!" sobbed Mrs. Norton.

"That wouldn't bring her back," negatived Dave.

"What do you mean?" demanded Jack, his face paling another shade.

"The Count wanted to marry Phoebe. He still does. Bussoli once let out that the Count had spent nearly all of his money in the effort to fascinate Phoebe Fair. Now, if the Count wants to marry Phoebe, do you think he'd consider a ransom as against getting her fortune itself?"

"But you forget that Phoebe has spirit," cried Jack, warmly. "I firmly believe the girl would die sooner than marry the fellow."

"Yes, if her spirit gets free play," Dave hinted. "But what will happen if she finds herself, month after month, still a hopeless prisoner somewhere in these great mountains? Suppose the Count shows her that the only way to get back into the world is as his Countess? What then?"

"But all this is suggesting nothing," wailed Mrs. Norton. "We are not taking a single step."

There came a knock at the door.

"The card of the Count del' Morani," Dave announced.

"Not in to the Count, now or at any other time," said Jack, quickly, without even looking at his mother.

"You heard!" said Dave, crisply, handing the card back to the servant, and closing the door in the fellow's face.

"Was that advisable?" asked Mrs. Norton, looking at our hero as soon as they heard the servant's departing steps.

"Yes," nodded our hero. "The only thing that can be done. We must have no part with the Count."

Another knock. It was Caroli's.

"I went for the good captain," announced the Corsican, as our hero opened the door to him. "He is here—below."

"Will you be good enough to ask him to come up?" Dave asked.

"That's the first right move," approved Jack as Caroli started below.

Captain Bernadine looked troubled indeed as he entered the room.

"This is terrible news," he cried. "Terrible! It will get me in great trouble with my government. But I have at least some good news for you?"

"What?" cried our hero, eagerly.

"The Count del' Morani——"

"Has just been hanged, or had an apoplectic stroke?" mocked young Graham.

"No. His excellency, the Count, has offered to go with our searching expedition, and he will add some of his own men to mine to serve as trailers."

To his great astonishment, Captain Bernadine looked at three blank faces.

"Captain," said our hero, grimly, "it is difficult for us to be pleased by anything that the Count does."

"But the Count is our only hope," cried the Frenchman, warmly.

"Then we're without hope," sighed Dave. "But tell us, captain, you have decided to push a column of men out into the mountains?"

"At once! I hastened here as fast as I could run, but my men must be in the road without by this time. And the Counts starts with us. He has sent a messenger to order some of his men to join the column."

"Then the Count must go?"

"Yes," answered Bernadine, rather stiffly.

He himself regarded the Count del' Morani as a gentleman. He could not understand why these Americans should persist in a different view.

"I start at once," added Bernadine.

"Yours truly, then," sighed Dave.

He shook hands with Mrs. Norton and her son, added a few words of encouragement that he himself did not feel and followed the Frenchman down the stairs.

* * * * *

It was dusk, and some thirty men, having eaten, were preparing to go into camp for the night.

Count Morani had been joined, as planned, by four of his own woodsmen.

Dave and Caroli were also present.

As for the rest, they were Captain Bernadine, two sergeants, three corporals and a detail of infantry soldiers.

All the rest of that day until now they had followed blindly on a trail the worth of which they knew nothing.

Captain Bernadine had followed the trail of that sham vegetable wagon as far as that had been possible.

That trail had led up into the mountains, but there had been lost.

From that point the Count del' Morani had undertaken to pilot the column.

To his own great astonishment, the Count found that Bernadine placed more confidence in our hero's opinions.

For that astute Frenchman remembered how cleverly our hero had trapped the treacherous sergeant who had aided Pietri in escaping.

So, though the Count advised and Dave listened, our hero always took the view exactly opposite to that of Morani, and Bernadine had felt urged to follow the American advice in preference to the Corsican.

Two or three times Morani had endeavored to talk with our hero.

But each time Dave, with a cold stare, had turned away from his enemy.

To Caroli the Count paid no heed whatever, for which our hero's poor friend did not know whether to be pleased or alarmed.

"Well, we are not doing much," sighed Bernadine, dejectedly, as he spread his blanket on the ground and seated himself on it.

"I didn't think we would," Dave responded. "This going out with a detachment of soldiers is like tying a bell around a cat's neck before it goes after mice."

"But how else could we find 'em?" queried the puzzled captain.

"I'd give the world now for a dozen good American cowboys and a pair of the real redskin scouts," muttered Dave. "They'd go into the brush, and come out with Pietri's scalp."

Caroli accepted one of the captain's cigarettes, lit it and seated himself on the edge of the blanket, closing his eyes.

Off at the further end of the little camp, close to one of the sentries, Morani had taken his stand against the trunk of a tree.

"I think I can make the most money to-night by keeping my eyes on you," Dave muttered under his breath.

"If you show no interest and go sound asleep early in the

night I shall conclude that you know we're a good ways from your henchman, Pietri."

But as the dark came on, and figures about the camp became dim, it looked plain that the Count didn't intend to court sleep.

"I'll keep an eye on you," murmured the boy.

He strolled away from the Count, passing in and out among the sleeping figures.

Then, by a roundabout way, our hero found his path back to a point from which he could watch the glowing end of del' Morani's cigar.

A slight sound beside our hero made him turn like a flash.

There, his eyes glaring, his breath coming quickly but silently, crouched one of the Count's own men.

The fellow was in the act of raising his knife to strike.

Flop! Young Graham was down in a second, gripping hard at both the wretch's ankles.

Bump! Dave pitched him over backward with jarring force. Then, ere the Corsican knew what had happened, Dave was a-top of him, twisting his wrist until that knife was secured.

"What is happening?" sharply demanded the corporal of the guard, running up.

"Call your captain," desired Dave. "No; don't leave here. Pass the word for your captain."

Quickly, on hearing his name, Bernadine came to the spot. But Morani was there first.

"What's this?" cried Bernadine, in amazement.

"You see," remarked Dave, quietly, "it was necessary to defend myself."

"Count," cried the captain, turning upon the cool Morani, "you have been deceived in at least one of your men."

"If a true charge has been made," returned Morani, shrugging his shoulders. "You should at least make sure of that much, captain."

It was a deliberate attempt to force young Graham into a dispute, a quarrel, but Dave was too much on his guard. He did not answer, but continued to sit astride of the Corsican whom he had disarmed.

"Oh, I do not doubt M. Graham's word, since he would have no occasion to deceive me," rejoined Bernadine. "Corporal, you will place this fellow in irons, and see that he is kept a strict prisoner. Count, I suppose that will not offend you?"

"Oh, no, if you believe him guilty," replied Morani, sulkily, as he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Soon quiet came down over the camp again. Bernadine was trying to get to sleep, while Caroli had lain himself alongside him that he might be under the protection of the sentry stationed near the officer.

But Dave was not to be seen.

He had again located Morani in the darkness, and was watching that Corsican nobleman from covert.

For an hour it was a useless watch.

But at last our hero saw Morani step out past one of the sentries.

"Captain," whispered the boy, darting back to where Bernadine lay, "Count del' Morani has left the camp."

"He has done no harm, then," murmured the captain, indifferently.

"Then, sir, with your permission, I will leave camp, too."

"You really want to leave camp?" asked the captain, opening his eyes.

"Assuredly I do."

"Oh, well, there can be no objection, if you take all the risk."

"I do."

"Corporal," murmured the captain, "say to the sentry that Mr. Graham has permission to leave camp."

A moment later Dave was stealing softly along through the dark in the direction that he had seen Morani take.

Our hero had often played "Indians and Whites" when a small boy.

That practice in woodcraft and stealthy trailing now stood him in good stead.

But two hundred feet away from camp, our hero rounded a bush, then crouched, halting.

"Just to make sure that one of the Count's good fellows isn't trailing me in turn," uttered the boy, grimly. "These fellows have a mania for trying to run a knife through the middle of a fellow's back. That isn't the way a Yankee fights, but sometimes he knows enough to make sure that the other fellow isn't fighting that way either."

No one coming along on the trail, our hero soon rose and darted ahead again.

Making no noise himself as he moved swiftly along, our hero's ears were alert for the faintest noise from anyone else.

He heard it at last, a little way ahead.

"Now, to see if it's our Count," muttered the boy.

The glowing end of a cigar first caught Graham's searching gaze.

Whoever it was ahead, after smoking for a moment or two, the smoker removed the cigar from his mouth, turning it in a small circle at his right side.

"A signal—a silent pass-word of some sort," thrilled the spy. "Then the Count—for it's he—expects to meet someone, and is signalling."

After that our hero went with greater care than ever.

"Ugh!" shivered the boy. "That may not be a pass-word—that circling of the cigar. It may be a signal—the Count's order to the beholder to find out whether he is being followed."

The circling light, in itself, made the trailing so easy that Dave was able to follow more on the flank, instead of directly behind his quarry.

"Eh? Something doing?" quivered the boy, stopping quickly at last.

The lighted end of the Count's cigar had stopped circling, glowing steadily at one point.

But not more than thirty yards ahead of the Count, against a background of deep forest, another light ap-

peared—smaller, as if it came from the end of a lighted cigarette.

"This game of the fireflies is getting mighty interesting," quivered the youngster, again moving softly ahead, but more out on the flank.

The Count's light now moved swiftly down toward the ground, as if its holder had made a low bow.

In the next instant the light beyond the Count did the same.

Now, Morani, with his cigar in his mouth, moved jauntily forward.

He halted half a dozen feet away from a small, alert, hawk-eyed man who held a carbine at "ready."

In that intense darkness Dave Graham, however, was close also.

"You are close to us, Count," whispered the fellow with the carbine.

"Ave Maria, yes. But that is not my fault," murmured Morani. "I did my best to get the troops further away. But that fool of a Bernadine is going too much by what the American boy says. So I have come to give Pietri warning."

"He already knows where the troops are," replied the sentry of the bandits.

"He does? And he has not moved further away," cried the Count, in a low tone. "But, then, Pietri is a fox, who cannot be caught! Well, I will go forward and see your chief."

"And the lady?" asked the sentry.

With a shrug the Count del' Morani passed the man.

"The lady? Phoebe! I'll be doing something, too!" quivered our hero.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN PIETRI'S LAIR.

On the point of stealing forward, Dave halted, throbbing.

"Shall I go back and get Bernadine and the soldiers?" he asked himself. "Yet what would be the use? That heavy-footed French infantry would do nothing but make such a racket that the foxes would steal away."

Only a moment did Dave hesitate.

Then, gliding backward a few yards, he turned and went forward in the direction taken by Morani.

"That little fellow may be a scout, rather than a sentry," murmured the boy, thoughtfully. "In any case I will do better to follow until I have found just where the camp is. And Phoebe! Oh, if only I could find her and get her out of this gang's hands!"

The chase led through the forest for at least two hundred yards further.

But Morani, as if feeling that he was inside his own lines, and wholly safe, had thrown off all pretence at cautious progress.

He strolled along slowly, somewhat noisily, but every now and then circling with the light at the end of his cigar.

"We are well met, my master!"

Morani had been stopped by a man who moved out from behind a tree.

The voice, low as it was, Dave knew to be Pietri's.

And in another instant our hero had the best possible confirmation of this, for he heard Morani's voice reply:

"My good Pietri, are you not careless, when you know the troops to be so close?"

"But you, Count, must have known you would find me here, or you would not have ventured on leaving the camp of the soldiers."

"I feared I would find you here," Morani answered. "You are so fond of taking desperate chances."

"What chance?" demanded Pietri. "You know well where my camp is, and you know whether or not it would need a regiment of soldiers to drive us out of it."

"True. Well, I will go on. But our young lady from America, my good Pietri?"

"She is crying her eyes out for you, I assure your excellency," cried Pietri, mockingly.

"I will take your word for that," laughed the Count del' Morani. "No, I will go and see her. She has not retired yet?"

"If she has she is easily roused," replied Pietri, with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. "Success to your excellency's wooing."

Listening, Dave gripped his hands tightly, a hot flush of wrath coming to his face and brow.

Through the trees went Count and pursuer. Dave was moving with throbbing care now, for be as cautious as he would, there was danger at any instant of running on to the point of a gun.

Save for a rather dull pen-knife, the American was not armed, for he had in his haste forgotten to bring his weapons from camp.

Now Dave and the man he was following came to the edge of the forest.

Just beyond a natural wall of rock loomed steeply up.

So steep was the barrier, so regular its form, that at first glance in the dark it looked like a fort raised by the hands of men.

Morani was headed toward a cleft in the rock.

An armed man stood here, wide awake and alert.

"Good evening, Count."

"Good evening, Paoli. You will step aside, for I am going into the camp."

"Truly," nodded the fellow, stepping out of the cleft.

This passage through the great wall was not more than three feet wide at the opening.

"Crackey!" muttered Dave. "It doesn't look as if I would go further—unless I can at least kill that sentry without noise, which is plainly impossible."

Crouching flat on the ground, his head hidden behind the trunk of a tree, Dave, his heart sinking with disap-

pointment, saw Morani step in through the passageway in the wall, after which the sentry stepped back into his place.

"Something may happen, anyway," quavered Dave. "At least, I've gone too far to turn back until I've tried to do something."

Five minutes went by. Dave, watching, without daring to move nearer to the camp, was consumed by anxiety.

Next, he had something else to worry about. A man passed so close that Dave feared to be caught before he could rise and run.

But the man went on, out into the open, over to the sentry at the pass.

"Pietri again," noted the boy.

"Paoli," spoke Pietri, "I am going to sleep out in the woods. The fox never sleeps in a trap, you know. Follow me, and I will show you where I shall rest, that you may know where I am to be found if wanted. It is but a minute's step from here."

Shouldering his carbine, Paoli stepped off briskly behind the taller chief.

Dave heard them go past him. He waited for no more.

Risen, crouching, he looked off over his shoulder, then darted forward like a mouse rushing to cover.

He was in the pass in a twinkling.

For some hundred feet, with a few turnings, this natural pass led through the wall.

And now, almost before he had time to realize it, our hero stumbled upon the actual camp of Pietri.

In here, sheltered by the towering walls of rock, was a little grove of perhaps an acre in extent.

Groups of low trees, clumps of bushes, Dave made out by the aid of the few lights that burned here.

For, sheltered as they were, these men of Pietri's felt safe in having lights, even with the soldier enemies a scant half-mile away.

Lying flat on the ground, as far back as he could in the darkness of the pass, his head close to the ground and his whole body close to one of the walls, Dave felt that he had a fair chance of peering in without being detected.

There were fourteen men of the band in sight. Of those that our hero counted a half dozen were on the ground, as if asleep.

Three men, squatted in a group under the light of a torch, were shaking dice.

In another group five more, with wine bottles between them, were quietly playing a game of cards.

Off in another corner of the grove Dave just made out the flutter of a white dress—that which Phoebe had worn at the time of her swift abduction.

The girl was moving, as if in agitation, near a tree. For a moment all but her head and shoulders disappeared behind a clump of bushes.

The figure of a man was near her, almost motionless.

"That must be Morani," quavered the spy.

"You are brave enough to insult a helpless woman," came in Phoebe's low, contemptuous voice.

Morani's sneering laugh answered, as he stood, motionless, before the girl.

"A thousand dollars, if I had it here, for one punch at your face, Count!" throbbed the raging boy.

With a grunt, one of the dice-throwers stood up to blow out the torch under which he and his mates had been playing their game.

The fellows stretched themselves out for a night's sleep.

This having been the light nearer the pass, Dave now found himself more in the shadow than ever.

"Thank heaven!" our hero quivered, gratefully. "I believe I can wriggle my way in now."

Count Morani was still gloating over the girl's helpless indignation.

"Am I so vile, then?" he sneered. "You must realize, girl, that I can keep you a prisoner here in the forests for years to come. What! You would not wed me to escape this sort of a life?"

"Wed you?" demanded Phoebe, her eyes lighting up with a fresh access of contempt. "It will not be necessary. Sooner or later I shall find something with which to kill myself."

"But that would be a shame," cried the Count, in real or pretended alarm. "Signorina, you think it is only your money that I want. True, with most women, that would be sufficient. But you—I want you, now, a thousand times more than I do your money. I am not easily charmed by women. I have met many of them. But you—you are beautiful! You madden me!"

"Even more than my American dollars?" jeered the girl.

"A pest on your many, many dollars, I had almost said," cried the Count del' Morani. "Even were I to learn that you had lost all your fortune, you should still be my prisoner until we have brought the priest and suitable witnesses out here into the forest. For my Countess you shall be, signorina!"

"My 'yes' will be needed before the priest, will it not?" the girl demanded, coldly.

"Truly."

"Then that 'yes' stands between you and your Countess, you——"

"Do not insult me," begged the Count, almost humbly.

"So you are trying the softer mood?" jeered the desperate girl, in a hard voice. "It will work no better than threats of force."

"Then perhaps I shall try actual force," cried Morani, in a low, intense tone.

He took a swift step toward her.

The girl, crying out in her alarm, dodged back beside the bush.

As she did so, she felt a hand slipped into hers.

That strange hand gave hers a squeeze that was gentle, reassuring, earnest—imploring.

Something in that unexpected contact thrilled Phoebe Fair—swayed her with hope.

She did not cry out, but gave a quick gasp. Then:

"Count, you will oblige me in at least one thing?"

"In a hundred—in a thousand, my American beauty!"

"Then step back twenty paces, and favor me with a glimpse of your back while I ponder on how to answer you."

Looking sharply at the girl, then shrugging his shoulders and murmuring something that could not be heard, Count del' Morani turned and walked a few paces away.

No sooner had he turned than Phoebe Fair shot a swift look downward.

Her whole being seemed to thrill with joy as she bent and whispered:

"Dave! Dave Graham! You dear, priceless fellow!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE LION BEARDED.

"Get rid of the fellow as quickly as you can, and then be here," whispered Dave. "Don't be afraid of him. I'll defend you with my life!"

He gave her hand a quick squeeze.

Phoebe returned the pressure gratefully.

In another instant Dave had crept back into the bushes out of sight.

Phoebe, holding herself erect, stood there, her bosom rising and falling with the stress of this new excitement until the Count turned and called:

"May I return, signorina?"

"If you insist," replied the girl, with a pretence at coldness that was meant to mask the emotions that were tearing at her heart and brain.

"Cospetto! That is but a poor welcome," complained Morani, jeeringly.

"Are you surprised, Count, that I am not sooner able to master my wits as I should?" asked the girl.

Morani started, looking at her keenly.

"I believe you are coming to your senses?" he cried, eagerly.

"Perhaps I do not understand you," she hinted.

"Well, then, signorina, may I hope that you are beginning to see my proposition in a more reasonable light?"

"Do you mean that I am beginning to think that it might be better even to wed you than to remain forever a prisoner among these rough men?"

"Put it that way, if you will," replied the Count, shrugging his shoulders. "I had hopes you would say that my dash and gallantry in this romantic wooing had begun to make their impression on your woman's heart."

"I wonder if that is the meaning of it all?" asked Phoebe, artfully.

With a cry the Count sprang forward to seize her hand.

But Phoebe eluded him.

"Back, please, Count del' Morani. If you have made any start at all, do not spoil it by being too hasty."

Morani recoiled, cyeing the girl pantingly.

"If I dared believe——" he began.

But Phoebe interrupted him by a gesture that was pretendedly imploring.

"Do not believe anything to-night," she urged.

"To-night?"

"I need time, Count, to think over all the new ideas that are surging in my head. If you would aid your own cause then leave me now. Leave the camp. Return—well, be back here just before the end of the afternoon to-morrow. Do that——"

"Yes, yes! If I do that——?" breathed the Corsican.

"At that time you shall have my answer. But I must have time to think as I would."

"I may kiss your hand at parting?"

"Don't!" begged the girl, starting back. "Don't do anything—now—to disturb whatever good impression of you may be dawning in my mind."

"Then I go now," cried the Count. "I leave at once. I leave the camp also. Until to-morrow afternoon!"

He blew a kiss from the tips of his fingers in most gallant style; then, with a low bow, he turned and walked rapidly away.

Dave heard him leaving camp through the pass.

"Phoebe!" he whispered, softly.

"Yes, Dave!"

She came close to the bushes, bending over to hear what he had to say.

"Your heart is strong enough to attempt escape with me?"

"Can you ask?" she demanded, tremulously.

"There is a chance for us to get away, but there is also the probability that there will be violence. You will not shrink if I have to fight before you?"

"No, no! Am I not an American girl, of a race of fighting people?"

"Are you allowed to stroll the camp, Phoebe?"

"Yes, if I do not go near the pass and show no other signs of trying to escape."

"Then, see if you can find some sort of weapon for me. But do not risk being caught at it, even if you have to fail!"

"Wait!"

She glided away. Dave listened intently for any signs of trouble, but he did not try to watch her movements through the camp.

In less than three minutes the girl strolled past the bushes.

"I have a small bar of iron. Will that do?" she whispered.

"Yes, indeed! Let me have it."

"It is under my skirt. I am holding it there with one hand," Phoebe smiled.

She turned her back, but turned back again presently, holding out a heavy bar of iron some two feet long.

"Good enough," whispered the boy, delightedly. "But, say—oh, how shall I put it? Have you any article of

clothing that you can spare? Something that I can wrap around this club?"

"A corset waist?"

"Just the thing!"

"Wait!"

Again the girl slipped away, but presently returned, passing into the boy in the bushes a fluffy white ball.

It was thin and filmy, with much lace—such a dainty, elegant bit of fabric that Dave Graham grimaced as he began to wrap it around the business end of that rusty iron bar.

"I'll fasten it in place with my handkerchief," he whispered up at her. "Now, then!"

He rose, peering cautiously through the bushes and all around the camp.

"You are going to try it now?" thrilled the girl.

"Do the men appear to be generally asleep?"

"Yes."

"Come along, then. Swift and stealthy is the word."

Streaching out his left hand, he seized her right.

Together, hand in hand, crouching, they darted softly toward the pass.

Barely had they disappeared into it when, over the warm, still air, came a drowsy voice:

"What, my turn to stand guard? Very good! I am up at once."

"Forward, past the first bend, Phoebe!" throbbed the boy. "And stop there. We've got to have the first fight. Here comes the relief!"

Trembling slightly, but grit to the core, the girl stole forward, guided by our hero's arm.

Around the bend she halted at the first pull on her arm.

"Now crouch low and pray for a good stroke by my arm!" quivered the American boy.

Wheeling, steeling his nerves, our hero crouched for the spring.

The relief to the guard must come around this bend in the pass.

Already, his steps sounded on the rocky ground.

"Steady, lad!" quivered Dave, his arm uplifted.

A head came into sight—that of the relief sentry, walking jauntily, humming a tune, a carbine over his shoulder.

At the instant that the head showed Dave brought the padded iron bar down with crushing force.

Then, in the same instant, dropping the bar, he caught the limp form as it fell and let it come gently to earth.

In another twinkling he had the carbine, also a knife and a bandolier belt of small cartridge boxes.

"The knife and the iron bar for you, Phoebe!" he whispered.

The girl, though her eyes were big with horror, took the weapons at once.

"Now, keep just at my heels," whispered the boy. "One more stroke—and we ought to be free to go where we choose."

They stole forward. Just before the last bend in the passage Dave halted.

In dumb show he signalled the girl to wait, as he took the iron bar from her hands.

Then he stole forward, bending so low that he was almost on hands and knees.

Phoebe listened, but she heard nothing until Dave came back, treading with much less caution.

"The way's clear," he whispered, jubilantly. "Come—only step softly!"

Her right hand in his left, Phoebe moved swiftly in silence.

There was no guard now at the mouth of the pass. The two fugitives were quickly under the trees.

"We're free now, Phoebe, unless we have bad luck!" the boy whispered, as he piloted her cautiously along between the trees.

"That sentry on guard——?" she murmured, wonderingly.

"I took him away from his post. He won't trouble us," Dave answered, drily.

"You—you killed him?"

"Well, I had to stun him. And then I dragged him away so that you wouldn't be shocked by the sight of him."

"That was kind," murmured the girl, in his ear. "But you forget that I had to see you kill one man."

"Stun one," suggested Dave.

"Are you sure that's all you did to the men?"

"Oh, they'll have headaches, but otherwise be all right by morning," predicted the boy, cheerfully.

Phoebe shook her head, but did not contradict him.

"Are we past all danger?" she whispered.

"Why, there's one sentry out here in the woods, but I know just where he is, and you can be sure I'm not strolling right in his direction. But—gracious!"

For Pietri himself, carrying his carbine, had stepped into their path.

CHAPTER X.

"THE GREATEST LUCK OF THE YEAR."

Terrified at this grim spectre in their path, Phoebe shrank back.

She would have screamed had she not had the presence of mind to clap a hand over her mouth.

Dave, too, started, but he was not taken wholly un-awares.

He was carrying the carbine at his waist, the muzzle forward.

Now he swiftly brought the other hand around to steady the barrel, with a finger on the trigger.

But Pietri, though he was looking straight at our hero, looked as if he didn't see him.

"No, you don't!" muttered Dave, inwardly. "You may be the human fox, but you won't work any fox-like tricks on me!"

Yet, though our hero was prepared and resolute, he did not dare fire until he had to.

A single shot would doubtless be enough to rouse the camp, close to which they still were.

With a gasp of amazement Dave saw Pietri walk straight by him, presenting his back to the American boy.

Phoebe shrank back out of the bandit's path.

He was about to pass her, too, without word or action, when Dave Graham was roused to his senses.

"No, you don't!" he gritted under his breath, springing after the bandit.

Dave came up beside him, with the muzzle of the carbine trained on the man's body.

"Stop!" muttered the boy, in a low tone that was full of cold desperation, and he seized the man gently.

At the command Pietri stopped, and turned calmly.

Yet he did not show the least sign of being afraid.

"No tricks!" warned Dave, quietly.

Pietri calmly remained, staring vacantly ahead.

He seemed like one in a trance.

"Where are you going?" Dave wondered.

The look in the man's eyes was perfectly vacant.

It was Dave's turn to gasp again.

Then his quick brain solved the problem.

"Gracious!" he quavered.

"What is it?" whispered Phoebe over his shoulder.

"Pietri is walking in his sleep!"

"Impossible!"

"I want to show you something—something big," whispered Dave, bending forward and speaking softly in the girl's ear. "I'll turn him around and make him go in the other direction," and he guided the rascal.

To his great joy Pietri immediately moved ahead.

But Dave stepped at the fellow's side, and just a shade behind, with the carbine ready for instant work, in case this should all prove to be a wily trick on the part of the villain.

Pietri, however, walked slowly on, as if strolling through some odd, moving dream.

Phoebe, wondering, and fully as suspicious as our hero, kept just behind our hero at one side.

"Is he fooling us?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"You don't trust him?"

"Not for an instant. If he plays us false I'll kill him."

"You must!"

"Now, that's the kind of girl to have with you in a life and death matter," Dave told himself, glowingly. "She isn't squeamish a bit over fighting that has to be done."

Pietri slowed up, hesitating.

"To the left a little bit, and keep on," Dave whispered.

He had heard, somewhere, that when one speaks aloud to a sleep-walker there is always danger of waking him.

But when one speaks in whispers the whisper becomes, as it were, a part of the sleep-walker's strange dream.

With a whisper it is possible to control even a man of ugly disposition when he is walking in his sleep.

The whisper enters his brain as a part of his own prompting.

If Pietri really was walking in his sleep, Dave knew, then the fellow did not realize that he was being prompted by another.

Phoebe watched them both with fascinated eyes as they made their way through that forest.

Remembering where he had seen the scout of the bandits a while ago, our hero was careful to make a wide circle around the spot.

"He must be walking in his sleep," Phoebe whispered.

"Yes, I think so. And, gracious, girl! We're almost at the camp of the French soldiers!"

Those were anxious moments.

Both watched Pietri with straining vision as they drew nearer to the French infantry camp.

But Pietri appeared to walk on as unconcernedly as ever, all unconscious that he was being led anywhere against his own safety.

Dave now felt wholly sure that the man was actually sleep-walking.

"Oh, this is the greatest luck of the year!" gasped the boy, joyously. "But what a jolt for our friend, the fox, when he wakes up!"

"Halt!"

It was the challenge of a French sentry.

Pietri stopped, started, then resumed his forward walk. He had almost been waked by that stern challenge.

But Phoebe, grasping the situation, and trusting to her white clothes and woman's garb to save her from a bullet, lifted her skirts a couple of inches and darted forward.

She whispered something to a dull-witted sentry, who gasped, then threw up the muzzle of his rifle as Pietri, under the guidance of our hero, strolled forward.

"Walking in his sleep, you say?" whispered the sentry, at whose sleeve Phoebe clutched.

"Yes, don't wake him, but follow us into camp," whispered Dave. "If Pietri makes a move to escape you shoot him, as I shall do also."

Turning, the astounded sentry moved in with them.

"Is the Count del' Morani back in camp?" whispered Dave.

"Yes, sir, since about twenty minutes ago."

"Now, we'll stop here," whispered our hero in Pietri's ear, and the bandit obeyed calmly.

"Go in and wake Captain Bernadine," Dave commanded the sentry. "Don't, for your life, let the Count hear you! Now, hasten, and be discreet."

As soon as the sentry had gone Dave whispered in Pietri's ear:

"You might as well seat yourself on the ground."

Pietri promptly complied.

"And let me hold your carbine for you," whispered the boy, gently taking the gun, which the sleep-walking bandit gave up.

"I'll take it," proposed Phoebe, grittily.

"You know how to use one?" queried Dave.

"I have fired a rifle often."

"Good girl! Great!"

Dave nodded approvingly when he saw how Phoebe handled that carbine.

Cocking the piece, she held it ready to fire into Pietri's body, though she stood at one side, rather than in front of him.

Captain Bernadine, rubbing his eyes, came back, following the sentry.

"What's this nonsense I hear?" he grumbled, sleepily.

Then he caught sight of the dull-eyed Pietri, seated on the ground.

"Good heavens!" bellowed the captain. "The fox in our trap at last!"

At that loud voice Pietri awoke at last.

He stared, in bewilderment, for just a second.

Then with a roaring bellow, he leaped to his feet.

Flash! He had his knife in his right hand, a dangerous wild beast at bay!

"I don't know what trick this may be!" he roared; "but you haven't caught the fox! Not yet!"

CHAPTER XI.

VENGEANCE STRIKES

Idle boast!

Swift as a flash Dave snatched from Phoebe's hands the padded iron bar that she still carried, in addition to the carbine.

Whump! It was a dull, almost noiseless sound with which our hero struck Pietri.

Down went the bandit in a heap, just as soldiers came rushing to the spot.

"The irons!" cried Bernadine, joyously. "Bring the irons quickly! We shall take no more chance of the fox slipping away!"

And now there came running to the spot the most astounded man of all—the Count del' Morani.

He took one swift look at the unconscious Pietri, then glared amazedly at Dave Graham and Phoebe Fair.

There was no need to ask questions.

The Count saw that Pietri was a prisoner, that Phoebe Fair was in the infantry camp, and that Dave was with her.

It all centered around this American boy—all of the Count's present misfortunes.

And Dave, glaring coldly at the Count, asked of Captain Bernadine:

"Have you a second set of irons, captain?"

"Why, my brave American?"

"The Count needs them!"

"But where is his prisoner?" asked Bernadine, looking around.

"This Pietri is his right-hand man. Ask Miss Fair.

Ask me. We both saw him in Pietri's camp to-night. He threatened Miss Fair in case she would not agree to wed him."

"That is true," declared Phoebe, in cold wrath.

"Count, Count!" murmured the astonished captain, looking bewilderedly at the Corsican nobleman.

"Lies!" uttered Morani, sneeringly.

"Truth!" insisted Dave.

"Truth!" echoed Phoebe.

"Oh, well," said the captain, with a French shrug of his shoulders, "we will talk this over in Barria, Count."

"And then the whole story will come out," Dave declared. "For one thing, captain, the stories of Miss Fair and myself should have weight. We are neither lunatics nor liars. And wait until Pietri finds himself sentenced to be hanged for brigandage. Then we shall see if he will not also tell the truth about the Count del' Morani."

"We will take the time to discuss this all when we are back in town," insisted the puzzled Bernadine. "Count, I assure you that you have not lost my esteem."

"For which I thank you, captain," replied the Corsican, with a bow.

"Oh, well," uttered Dave, grimly, "wait until we shall hear what Pietri himself has to say. And, surely, a military court will believe Miss Fair and myself."

At this plain menace the Count's face seemed to turn to a greenish hue.

His jaw dropped, great beads standing out on his forehead.

"There is more than one judge in a military court," Dave uttered, mockingly, as he looked Morani full in the eye.

Pietri, ironed, was now borne further into camp on one of the hospital stretchers that soldiers carry when they go into the field.

"Permit me to suggest, captain, that, through the balance of the night you keep a strong guard over Pietri. Look out that he is not still playing the fox," suggested Graham.

"He shall have twelve men march by his stretcher," replied Bernadine, vimfully.

"March? Then you return to town at once?"

"As speedily as French infantry can march," replied Bernadine, stoutly.

"Good enough!" uttered Dave, gleefully. "And Miss Fair? You will also see that she is well guarded on the tramp over these rough mountain roads?"

"She shall walk inside the guard around Pietri," promised the French officer.

Caroli, awake at last, in this camp of strange surprises, came forward to learn all that had occurred.

And Captain Bernadine listened, too, with deepest interest.

But, whenever the Count's name was mentioned, the good Frenchman simply looked puzzled.

He could not yet bring himself to believe that a nobleman would be mixed up in such dastardly plots.

The command was soon ready to march.

Dave and Caroli, at Bernadine's suggestion, fell in just behind the guard over Pietri.

That human fox still lay, in real or seeming unconsciousness, on a stretcher that was borne by four men.

One of Morani's men was still under arrest—the one who had attempted to knife our hero.

But the Count and his other three men walked at the rear, not many yards behind our hero and Caroli.

The Count was sullenly silent.

His face twitched. His eyes had a shifty look in them.

He was no longer jaunty of manner or springy of gait.

In a word, he had the look of a man who realizes that the proof of his great guilt will soon be forthcoming.

Even Captain Bernadine had that thought as he looked at the Count two or three times.

"If he weren't a nobleman, I'd put the irons on his arms and make sure," murmured the captain. "But he will go back to Barria without irons, and that will save trouble and unpleasant feelings."

Two miles of the distance homeward over the rough hill roads were covered in the first half hour.

Phoebe stood this walk well, as she had stood all the strain of the day and the night.

If she suffered at all from physical strain, her will-power kept her from showing the fact.

"Now!"

The hissing word came in the Count's voice.

That nobleman and his three followers had stole swiftly forward.

Caroli was knocked down by a single blow.

Dave started to fight, but, surrounded by four men, all with knives drawn, he was quickly seized.

"What's that back there?" roared Bernadine. "Stop! Stop, I say!"

But Dave, overpowered, and in the arms of two stalwart Corsicans, was borne swiftly from the road into the brush.

"Rush forward, you men, and get them!" bawled Bernadine, himself following puffingly in the pursuit.

"Stop!" rang the Count's menacing voice. "Unless you want the American killed, stop!"

Two of the foremost soldiers in the pursuit had leveled their rifles.

But the Count, looking back, saw.

"Stop!" he shouted. "At the first shot the American shall be killed!"

The Corsican had halted, squarely in the path of Bernadine and his men.

"Remember, captain," mocked the nobleman. "A step forward, by you or your men, will cost that boy his life!"

"But, Count, you are mad," pleaded the poor Frenchman.

"Mad enough to wreak any vengeance, if I am crossed again," jeered the Count.

Dave had just been warned by one of his bearers that he would be killed if he called out again.

It was not fear of death that kept Dave from shouting out.

But he was anxious to live, anxious to keep his senses, that he might see through, to the finish, the meaning of this new game.

His bearers bore him swiftly into the jungle.

Their third comrade, armed with knife and pistol, had stayed behind to back up his noble master if a fight opened.

Flop! Dave was dumped on to the ground.

Choked almost insensible by one of his captors, he was bound and gagged by the other.

In the meantime, the Count and his single henchman were keeping more than twenty French soldiers at bay simply by the threat to kill this American boy.

But at last the Count muttered something softly to his henchman.

Then, swiftly ducking, both started on the run, going zig-zag in two different directions.

"Tricked!" screamed Bernadine. "Fire, my men, and try to hit!"

A hail of bullets sizzed into the forest.

But the Count and his men darted through it all unharmed, meeting beyond, where Dave's two captors waited with their helpless prisoner.

Off in the forest the French soldiers could be heard, plodding through the forest, hunting, keyed up to the point of shooting if they saw anything to shoot at.

But Morani, trusting much to the security of the hiding-place in which he and his men crouched, drew his knife and knelt beside Dave Graham.

"At least, if they find you, they shall not save you!" Morani whispered, tauntingly.

Dave heard—knew that death, or worse, was to be his—but looked back, not afraid.

By degrees the sounds of searching ceased.

Turning to one of his men, the Count then commanded: "Hasten back to the camp. Bring the men here!"

Dave gave a suppressed little shudder at this command.

"The whole crew together will make it interesting for me," he told himself. "But I don't care. If they've got me, Bernadine has Pietri. And Phœbe—God bless the dear girl—is quite safe!"

Presently Morani lighted a cigar.

"In a few minutes more," he announced, jeeringly, "you may have that pad of rag taken from between your teeth. It will be safe then. Have no hope of rescue. Bernadine knows the mazes of these forests sufficiently so that he will not wear his men out hunting—especially at the risk of losing my faithful Pietri. Curse you, it was you who destroyed Pietri. They will hang him. So his late crew shall have the pleasure of advising in what form our vengeance shall light on you. Would that Pietri were here, though! He had the demon's own ingenuity for killing by torment!"

"So that's the programme—death by torture!" Dave shivered. "And they'll do it, too—these fiends! Dave,

my boy, brace up! Though they scare the life out of you before they kill you, don't let 'em see it! Be an American like those brave men that Indians have burned at the stake!"

His cigar burned down, Morani tossed it away and turned to one of his men.

"You may take that rag out of the American's mouth now."

Out came the gag.

Morani looked to see if Dave had aught to say.

But Graham, after two or three deep breaths, lay on his back, silent, his eyes closed.

"Well?" jeered the Count. "Nothing to say?"

Our hero made no response.

"You will talk soon enough!" laughed the Count del Morani, wickedly.

Still no answer from the prisoner.

"You will not only talk—you will do more," persisted the Count.

Dave's lips did not move.

"You will call out imploringly for mercy. You will utter shrieks that will go all the way up to heaven!"

Another pause.

"And your prayers will do you no good," finished Morani, wickedly. "Not a particle of good!"

Dave Graham answered by a mild snore.

"Ho! So you sleep?" jeered Morani. "Oh, well, after a few hours your sleep shall be deep indeed. There shall be a feast again in these mountains, but you shall be the only morsel at it."

A snore came from between the boy's lips that was just a bit louder than the first had been.

"Wake up!" jeered Morani.

Sting! He jabbed his knife into the boy's side—just far enough to draw the blood.

But the blow, skilfully given, was delivered with such sharpness that Dave recoiled.

"Perhaps you will prefer to talk to me, rather than have your body filled with such little stings," quivered the Count. "Come, now, talk with me to while the time away."

But Dave, with his eyes closed, did not answer.

"One more little prick of the steel," leered Morani. "Just enough to make you talkative."

Instead of the point of the knife, Morani thrust the tip of a finger against our hero's side.

Yet Graham, fully expecting the steel instead, recoiled as he had done before.

"Come," laughed the Count, "it is cheaper to talk than to suffer. Have you nothing to say?"

"Yes."

Dave opened his eyes, looking straight into those of his enemy.

"What would you say?" jeered the tormentor.

"I was thinking of how to name you."

"Now, I am curious," smiled Morani, wickedly. "Let me hear what you would name me."

"Well," replied Dave, slowly, "you can be called nothing else as aptly as——"

"Go on!"

"Cur! There, you are named."

"I shall remember it when the *rèvenge-feast* begins," retorted Morani, grimly.

A figure moved in out of the darkness.

"Oh, you, my excellent fellow?" demanded the Count, recognizing one of Pietri's crew in the new-comer. "And the others?"

"We are all here," replied the man.

Silently as so many spectres these men moved in.

"All here?" asked Morani, when the new arrivals ceased coming.

"All but two," replied their spokesman. "One of our number has been killed; the other knows nothing. One was the guard at the pass, the other the relief. They must have been downed by this cursed American."

"Oh, well, the American is yours now," grimaced Morani. "Do as you please with him, so that you kill him, and not too speedily."

"In how much time should he die, excellent Count?" asked the spokesman, after a pause.

"Oh, well, as we have four hours and a half to daylight, the death need not happen in less than three hours. After that we shall have time to find a haven safe from prying soldiers."

The men who had served under Pietri talked in whispers.

At last their spokesman approached the Count del' Morani.

"Excellent Count," he announced, "we have chosen."

"What have you selected?"

"It is many days, Count, since we have had the true vengeance of the Corsican bandit."

"Ah!"

"So, Count, if you approve, we have chosen the pastime of seeing our enemy bleed slowly to death."

"Excellent!" cried the Count del' Morani.

Then, with a face full of evil leering, he turned to our hero.

"You have heard, Signor Graham? Have you anything to say?"

"Not a word," Dave rejoined, speaking steadily and looking his enemy fully in the eyes.

"Oh, well," retorted Morani, with a shrug, "it would not do much good if you did say anything. But you will be interested in seeing how our pastime is carried on!"

Then, to the black-browed men clustering around:

"Prepare the morsel for the ordeal!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

The spokesman for Pietri's men now took command.

"To the tree!" he said, briefly.

Two of the fellows lifted young Graham, carrying him bodily to a grand old tree close at hand.

Here, with nimble fingers, they bound him to the trunk. "Where do you start?" asked the Count, when the boy had been bound.

"At his temples," replied the spokesman, coldly. "We open a small vein on either temple. Presently, Count, one vein in his forehead, when we want some of his blood to trickle down into his eyes."

"Heavens!" gasped Dave Graham. "But get your grit up, lad, and pray for speedy death at the same time!"

"You have left his clothing on him," observed Morani.

"We shall cut away the clothing as we search for new veins," replied the chief tormentor.

Dave, looking straight ahead, saw that chief tormentor take out a small knife and test its point and edge on his thumb.

Count Morani moved closer to the tree, looking intently at our hero's face.

"I am interested," declared the nobleman. "I have not witnessed such a sight in years—not since I was your age or thereabouts."

"You can have my place here, if your curiosity goes that far," proposed Dave, in the same steady voice.

He smiled bravely into the Count's eyes.

"Corpo del Diavolo!" uttered the Count. "You are going to be a morsel that it will be hard to eat with pleasure."

"If you expected to see me make a fuss," retorted the boy, "then you don't know the quality of the American."

Seat yourselves, comrades," ordered the master of these grim ceremonies.

"Now, to open the vein on the right temple," he continued.

He advanced close to Dave, watching to see whether our hero showed any tremor.

But Dave, by steeling himself, showed only a smiling front.

"The first thrust!" called out the tormentor, holding the knife forward to apply it.

"Hold on!" warned Dave, steadily. "You say you are going to open a vein?"

"That is the plan, signor."

The Count laughed.

"It is all well enough," went on Graham, calmly; "if you know the game well enough."

"You suspect, then, signor, that I do not?" demanded the master of ceremonies.

"Are you sure that you can tell a vein from an artery?"

Morani laughed aloud. He could afford to be amused, now that he was sure of his vengeance.

Even the tormentor chose to be amused.

"Then you suspect, signor, that I am too ignorant to know a vein from an artery. I shall show you. If you yourself know the difference, tell me whether I now open the right blood vessel."

Again he raised the knife to apply it.

Crack! Throwing up his arms, wheeling, whirling, the fellow pitched forward.

In that same instant every man in the crowd started to leap to his feet.

That first revolver shot, which sent down the fellow with the knife, was but the signal shot for a volley.

"Steady, my men, and do not let one get away!" roared the hoarse voice of that good old soldier, Bernadine.

Two or three of the men, recovering their wits more promptly than the others, started to run or fight.

But all was equally useless, for now the soldiers were charging through the scene, striking at or shooting at all whom they met of the enemy.

More than anyone else the Count del' Morani kept his wits in this fearful ordeal of disaster.

Almost at the first sound of the shots, uttering an oath, he thrust a hand under his coat for his knife.

It flashed. He sprang forward to plant it in Dave Graham's breast.

But a shriek rang on the air.

Something white fluttered, and a girl threw her body between the Count and his vengeance.

"Stand back, or I reach him through you!" roared Morani.

But Caroli was there at his side. There was another flash, and the Count himself reeled as the steel struck between his ribs.

But now Phoebe Fair saved another life.

"Don't kill him!" she screamed, tugging at Morani's arm. "Save him for the hangman!"

"Let me have the Count," gruffed Captain Bernadine, running up. "Here, corporal! The irons for his excellency, the Count!"

Morani groaned as he felt his arms being confined under the bands of steel.

Though wounded, the Count was not by any means done for.

He would live to face the military court.

The fight was over. Only three wounded men, besides the Count, survived.

Corali, restrained from his act of vengeance, had employed his knife, instead, in freeing our hero.

Dave's first thought was of Phoebe.

She stood leaning faintly against a tree close to that to which he had been bound.

"Come out of this," he begged, gently, taking her arm. "This is no sight for a girl. We will go a little distance away."

Without a word, she allowed Dave to lead her away.

Presently Bernadine, having attended to some other matters, joined the young people.

"Do you see this, my brave American?" he smiled, holding up one of his bare feet. "This is what your splendidly brave young American girl made us do. Made us—us, French soldiers—take off our shoes and leave them at the road that we might prowl the forest without making a sound. And it was she—she and Caroli—who, guarded by a single soldier, found this place and sent the word that brought us all here. Ma foi, but my heart was in my

mouth when she fired my revolver to save you the jab from that knife!"

"So it was you who saved me?" breathed Dave, looking deep into Phoebe's eyes.

A flush came over her pallor.

"We are even, then," she said, quietly. "We have each saved the other."

"And that," cried Dave Graham, eagerly, "is just as it should be. Our lives belong to each other!"

"I shall leave you two young people to adjust your claims," remarked Captain Bernadine, gravely.

Wheeling, the good old soldier turned away as if crossing a parade ground.

Captain Bernadine had enough to do.

In the first place, he pitched camp on that spot, while a messenger to town came back with nearly all of the carts in the village.

The dead and wounded were conveyed to Barria after daylight.

Of the three wounded brigands left alive one died; the other two were executed.

Pietri and the Count del' Morani left this life on the same gallows two months after their capture.

Caroli, for his splendid part in serving his American friends at the risk of his life, was rewarded by John Norton by means of a present of ten thousand dollars.

That's money enough to live on in Corsica.

As for Dave, when he returned to the United States, he decided on going into business.

John Norton became his partner.

As for Dave and Phoebe—well, remembering that their lives now belonged to each other, they sealed the compact at the altar.

Captain Bernadine—that was—is a colonel now.

THE END.

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